

# Beetlebum

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*"I should like to bury something precious in every place where I've been happy and then, when I'm old and ugly and miserable, I could come back and dig it up and remember."* -Evelyn Waugh

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## I.

# The Parting Glass

New York City, 2015

“Sweet suffering Jesus,” he muttered, a dark chuckle dying in his throat. The young man stood by a tall set of windows overlooking Central Park West and brooded. It was his old man’s legacy of failure that irked him most – a veritable roll call of flops, busts, and the occasional fiasco that would have any sane man running. But mostly, it was failure in the star-crossed annals of family. The aggrieved being young Liam O’Shea, judge, jailor, and newly disgruntled caretaker to the memory of his father, the late Francis Henry O’Shea. After many years of a mutual bob and weave, their fates crashed once again, screaming banshee style, on a crisp and clear October afternoon. Their crossroads: the spacious corner office of Terry Quinn, Esq., a sure, sharp, commanding, and all-around pricey fixer for when Manhattan’s well-to-do go rogue.

As the sun began to set, a warm light streamed through the windows, casting a patchwork of shadows across the floor. Nearby, a pendulum clock whirled and clicked with a pleasant rhythm. Liam’s eyes scanned the room before settling on a portrait of a Victorian-era lady seated beneath the trellises of an English garden. Her serene expression and regal bearing were the very embodiments of peaceful contemplation.

The young man caught sight of himself in the windows. His reflection told a different tale – a sad parade of bloodshot eyes, tousled hair, and the general bearings of a man three days deep into Boxcar Willie crustiness. He possessed all the hallmarks of too much sin and not enough sun. He sank into one of the soft office chairs and studied the painting again. A quick thought crossed his mind but just as soon it was gone.

Six weeks earlier, the elder O’Shea met his end when a newly purchased Maserati *Ghibli* proved the better of the man and skidded off a wet country road near his Westchester County estate. The Ghibli, a peacock street-legal jet engine mounted on four

Pirelli Zeros, was found down a steep ravine, having peacefully come to rest in a corner between two stone walls.

Francis O'Shea lived alone on one of the quiet back roads winding through this upscale part of the Hudson Valley. No spouse, family, presently indeterminate, recently retired, with just a handyman at the gates of his property to help police fill in the gaps. While wealthy bachelors were common here, the perils of such solitude loomed large.

One of the endgame risks for men who get a little too enthralled with having achieved the rarified air of 'estate owner' is that the moonshot to the ego tends to amplify the uglier aspects of human nature, running the unchecked potential for both Icarus-like heights and/or the eventual terminus of faded playboy spinsterhood, depending largely on which way your ethical calculus shakes out. An odd state of affairs on many levels, but one particularly vexing for a small-town sheriff trying to sort through the mess and locate the next of kin. A brief search ended with Mr. O'Shea's son, the only child and last immediate family member.

... Liam never had much use for the family name. He and the old man had spoken only a handful of times over the last two decades, and always with the pained and drained expression of men who would rather towel snap a sleeping Silverback than find themselves caught in the maw of idle family chit chat. Theirs was an accepted, if not unspoken, pact of polite estrangement, which proved a just tidy enough remedy to keep a pin in the family hand grenade.

Reunions, weddings, funerals, all had the same 'what the deuce' sense of chaos and tension in the air. His father's tall, burly figure would appear, towering above all the other heads, across some church or banquet hall at another birth, wedding, or goodbye. And so would begin another strategic two-step through the crowd to avoid being funneled into some corner by well-intentioned, if not slightly misguided relatives. However, father and son had recently managed a weekend of PTSD-tripping close proximity, which was just long enough to bury their ex-wife and mother.

On a bright summer morning, their somber figures stood a polite distance apart near the edge of a grave. The O'Shea men were a pair of Black-Irish identikits who resembled one another in a way that made both men uncomfortable. They exchanged pleasantries but rarely met eyes, simply nodding and talking off into the distance. Mercifully, Liam's mother shared few, if any, of these twitchy personality tics.

Keira O'Shea was a beloved figure with a bright, cheery smile and a calm, steady demeanor. In her two decades as a schoolteacher, she made many friends, and they had

come far and wide to pay their respects. Such a turnout was crackerjack, as the large crowd allowed the O'Shea boys the chance to slowly slink away into the sea of black, free to nurse personal grievances on the sly. Their matriarch, and last shared bond to a common past, was laid to rest in the shade of a chestnut oak in the Old Dutch Cemetery near Rhinebeck, NY, aged forty-nine years.

No one had called Francis Henry O'Shea by his given name in the nearly thirty years since his own mother's passing, unless, of course, they wanted a slap. Instead, his bright blue eyes, hawkish, rather aristocratic nose, and general good looks of a young Gabriel Byrne had earned him the honorific of 'Handsome Henry.' Those near and dear, or those simply committed to keeping Handsome Henry down on the farm, opted for the more modest 'Hank.'

But give a man the wrong handle, and things will eventually go sideways. A lesser owner might become enslaved by the upkeep of their alter ego – a situation that can break all sorts of bad, particularly if the man in question jockeyed a baseline disposition as stable as nitroglycerin in a paint spinner. And on this delicate point, the old man always swung for the fences. That is to say, Handsome Henry loved a spectacle, or more precisely, he loved to be the center of the spectacle.

For sixty-four years, this first-generation bog hopper rolled through life like a fella humming a tune the rest of us would never hear. And for his finale, he slipped out with the same unconventional panache, crashing the high-end sports car just a day before his son commenced with a difficult final year of law school.

This was a sound as a pound shot across the bow of a budding legal career, one noteworthy for its pirouettes through dreary work-study programs, soul numbing side hustles, and a two-year pause to fundraise for the home stretch. All the necessities to make the minimums on a stylish law school education, one that dovetailed nicely with a life of equally stylish insolvency out in the wilds of hipster Brooklyn. Six years of this tedium were on the verge of the big reveal when Hank came knocking.

Liam answered the phone just past midnight on a Thursday. He listened, thanked the officer, and declined the grief counselor's number. He laid the phone down, his ears still buzzing with the sound of the stranger's voice, and stared at the wall for some time. Finally, he snapped to, slipped on shoes and a sweatshirt, and climbed the narrow staircase to the roof of the three-story walkup. It was a warm night, with a faint quarter moon hanging low in the sky. He could see bits of Manhattan's skyline between the neighboring rooftops and the distant lights of planes circling the city. He found a spot against the ledge wall and lit up.

... Shock and confusion are quite the feral bracers. Time speeds up as it slows down, the pulse jackrabbits, and it feels like someone has parked a bucket excavator on your chest. Ten minutes on the phone with a stranger had just torched the firewall to a very durable narrative—one that kept all the principals at a nice, healthy distance, and followed a strict break-glass-only-in-case-of-emergency common understanding.

And even if the certainties of Hank involved a slow motion car crash here and there, they at least served as a kind of demented counterpoint-constant to the normal rhythms of life, and their loss signaled a new era of the unknown... The young man tried to find the words, but not much else came to mind—just a few scattered memories, with little rhyme or reason, save for the creeping sense that some manner of conclusion and commencement had just entered the same tight space. He smoked through the last of his pack and nodded off against the wall till dawn.

Six hours later, Liam was standing in the main ballroom of the St. Regis Hotel, surrounded by professors, administrators, and classmates. The younger O'Shea stood about an inch under six feet and was solidly built. His dark green eyes gave an impression of thoughtfulness mixed with a little bit of melancholy. His neatly trimmed black hair framed a face that, while not quite Handsome Henry pretty, was still respectable enough for polite company. But at the moment, his composure had abandoned him. He was trapped in this formal reception—and vaguely threatened requirement—for the returning third-year students. For the most part, a very stylish and elegant affair—sober, dignified, with classy finger foods and clubby chitchat all around.

For some of these gourmands, it was the real shindy of the social calendar; for other more melancholy types, it was two hours of a well-catered waterboarding. But in reality, just another in a growing line of networking socials and the chance to make yourself as politely conspicuous as possible, which was proving as important as the education itself.

The air was thick with stories of time spent teaching and interning, and even some volunteer work for the most decent of the bunch. And a not at all surprising number of dress rehearsals at the finer law firms up and down the East Coast.

The young man was unimpressed. He was also fairly certain he held the ace of spades on these bozos for any notable summer highlights. Of far more interest to Liam was the tightness building in his chest over the last twenty minutes, confusing matters, and gathering steam toward the kind of anxious, light-headed euphoria that can swing either way.



He signaled the bartender for some water... Where had *that* come from, he wondered? Despite the circumstances, his marbles still seemed in order. He had behaved himself at the open bar, and the general synapse frying shock of the last half day had already numbed him up good and proper, certainly past the point of sweating the little things. Rather, this commotion seemed the latest confirmation that a good chunk of this room just gave him the screaming meemies, even on the best of days.

Despite the modern, inclusive image for the check-writing boosters, many of these young minds still came from a place of exceptional privilege. And in a subtle but solid way, a great many also brought a fine, silver spoon brio to their roll... The rich are different than you and me, indeed – at least that’s the saying. And if you spend too much time with these people in close quarters, a mild but semi-permanent paranoia takes hold when your Christmas stories don’t involve spirited debates about the better chocolate shops in Gstaad. That’s a lot of psychic grief to pay good tuition for.

Best to just keep your own counsel at a swindler’s ball of future judges, professors, and all-around legal theorists sharing crab puffs with a far larger contingent of hungry, gorilla army, apex predator types putting the final touches on their license to plunder. And while practiced enough to move comfortably in their midst, the young man was never far from the hidden sausage-making realities of how he arrived and what moral gymnastics lurked on the way to his seat at the table.

Just the same, can any of you clown-shoes beat having the next of kin rolled down a mountain like a runaway pinwheel? How’s that, you say? Crickets? Well, you’ve got to find the hymn in the grim, or something like that... Though the young man would concede that the dark, morbid, and macabre are rarely funny when you’re not once or twice removed from the punchline. And the black-hearted rhythms of the O’Shea clan’s sense of humor, generally acknowledged as the grungiest of beasts from the deepest of Donegal bogs, smacked badly out of place.

This collection of beige would never understand, let alone appreciate, such fringe stylings. However, these were cranky ruminations best kept close to the chest. Better to smile through the pleasantries, execute a well-timed French goodbye, and beat a hasty path back to his own little slice of pie—a 741-square-foot walkup out on the edge of Bushwick. Where the comforts of a barley digestivo and a blackout strain of The Ghost Train awaited.

Several hours and many drinks later, he sat by his window and watched the last of the Keds and dreads human centipede roll past his door. Aggro Archies and blitzed-

out Bettys, booming voices as steeped in pitch as they were in casual wake-the-dead disregard.

This was the gang that couldn't shoot straight, carpetbagged in from the better parts of the country to have a go at life for a bit. Which ain't the worst of moves, as nine out of ten future sobriety sponsors agree, it's best to square away this type of mungo cosplay early.

Latter day hipsters, like sand mites or chiggers, need to be raked, staked, and driven across the land before they establish a beachhead in your corner of the world. But until that great day of equitable wrath arrives, where else but this fuck knuckle theme park could you sport a bow-tie suspender combo, drink your Schlitz from a mason jar, and tote an ancient Corona typewriter around town without the taxpayers pitchforking your janky ass out past the city gates?

But rest easy in this safest of spaces, where the judgments are few, save one or two from a cranky-preachy gargoyle holding Kangaroo Court on his reality-challenged neighbors, elephant-stomping past the windows at 2 a.m. But that mirror shines both ways, and soon a sinister self-reflection takes hold. Poor boy, once again victim to that old time high-hat hubris generally favored by moody only children and lizard people.

For in his heart, Liam knew he too was part of the problem. Perhaps a slightly more self-aware, reflective, and objective model, but guilty of the same shameless vanity, nonetheless. And even the most cynical among us would have to agree that a Mother Hubbard soft-soaped childhood in a just respectable enough suburb, still rolled as lavishly as the Borgias compared to the other 91% of the planet that didn't have the good sense to fall out of the right womb, in the right place, at the right time.

... Sweet fancy Moses, he laid his spliff on the windowsill. Had the reefer gods burned him again with another dodgy strain? Something with a little extra Bebop and Rocksteady to keep the kids on their toes? Was this to be another of those fiendishly *present* wildcard highs—two hours of shifting gears between *Happy Gilmore* giggle fits and a bottomless pit of despair? Were these in fact even *real* criticisms or just the fop sweat grumbling of one of the fortunate ones—the astronomically lucky enough to even have the wiggle room for complaints not involving a daily toe-to-toe with the mosquitoes for the rights to another tomorrow.

No, tonight called for quiet diversions, and who could deny that a hipster blitzkrieg bop wasn't one of this overpriced city's more sublime pleasures? Besides, if he had to give his coffee order to one more surly Oberlin Psychology BA attached to a

barista, giving him all sorts of bad noise about Liberian coffee farmers as she curates influencer shots on a phone made by a Chinese geezer who sees less sunlight than a vampire, then the young man might finally blow the motherboard and spontaneously combust right down Bedford Avenue... Luckily, this brand of mutual animus was usually dispelled with a friendly offer to go work it out over a couple of Bourbon Apple Sangrias and a few rounds of urban ax tossing.

... But then again, one must pause and ponder the times to come. Life was headed full bore toward servicing the future needs of the procession of closeted suburbanites raising hell down below.

And yes, to these privileged dingbats, he would be the \$350/hour fixer for their ceaseless folly. His services eventually retained for the chilly post-Brooklyn diaspora, where childish avocado toast concerns pale next to the IRS wondering why you have a mailbox in Liechtenstein, or the missus gets a second, none too discreet, cell phone for her Krav Maga instructor, or perhaps the black swan of your brood – the zygote who lived, come to bleed you dry – goes on a tequila and peyote fueled berserker, and suddenly you're on the next plane to the Yucatan, trying to guesstimate the delicate bail-bribe balance in a Cozumel jail... Yes, he would be there for them – a pre-gastritis Tom Joad riding herd on their private perversions, ready to facilitate a level of absolution that only a holy man could top.

The voices carried on for a bit, and then they were gone. His untouched takeout sat on the counter next to a life-sized Jenga of pizza boxes and unopened mail. The general condiment-to-food ratio was fairly respectable for a man his age, but one could sense the indoor camping lifestyle was wearing thin. Liam stretched out on the couch, suddenly in the mood for a little music. A death-metal Christmas would have been the inspired choice for the bushwhacking of the last twenty-four hours.

Instead, he went with a quiet mix of early Neil Young. He closed his eyes and rattled the widget in an empty can of Guinness, waiting for the devilish THC to find the autocorrect. A few tracks in, and he drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

## II.

### Here Comes the Sun

The next afternoon, Liam climbed on his dinged-up Kawasaki 650, crossed the Whitestone Bridge, and pegged it north to his father's home in the country. He reached the small town of Bedford a little before dusk. He kept it in low gear down the main street, as the locals in this wealthy enclave employ a small battalion of lawyers to keep the place arrested in its woodsy and quiet 1789 charm. An interesting zoning tradition, and one that mixes like oil and water with thumping Italian sports cars taking narrow country corners at a good seventy miles an hour.

Liam soon passed through an open set of iron gates, rounded the last bend in a tree-lined drive, and was greeted with a far more elaborate affair than expected. Looming up ahead was an immense Queen Anne-style house built of dark reddish brick with steep gables and slate-covered turrets. Four chimneys, each topped with cathedral flue pots, framed the corners, and a central turret capped with a pitched cupola towered above the stately home. The whole business sat atop a small knoll facing a long stretch of meadow filled with gold-tinged switchgrass and wildflowers.

Liam's eyes returned to the house and its bay windows, glowing in the late-day sun. As he waited on the iffy prospects of a gang-swarm by the retired Mossad types who pass for a Nest Doorbell in these better zip codes, he checked the address in his phone... This was, in fact, the real deal.

Just past the house, he could make out a stone lap pool and, further back, a small A-frame barn beside a wooden post paddock. One of several horses looked up from a hay feeder, studied the new guest for a moment, and then returned to his dinner. Liam froze in place, trying to process the scene. A lightning-fast ambush at the hands of 'the help' would no longer be necessary; the shock and awe of the last sixty seconds had done the job nicely, flipping the script and sideswiping any confidence left in his game.

He parked under the long porte-cochère and mulled the plan of action, mainly that he didn't have one. The police had put him in touch with a fellow described as his father's 'handyman.' The front gate would be open, and the security system turned off. All that remained was the delicious tension of commencement. Keeping an open mind was the order of the day, or at least the thinnest filament holding a common lineage together.

The young man stared at the house again for a moment... Well, last chance to cut tail and haul ass back to Brooklyn, where the game was lame, but at least he knew the rules. But a large, ornate door beckoned.

Liam tread lightly at first, making a slow circuit of the ground floor. The only sounds were the creaking wood floors beneath his boots and the quiet click of a grandfather clock at the end of the hallway. Arriving back at the foyer, he took a seat on the edge of the stairs. Confused first impressions were in order.

... Hank, a man who put the crusty back in clown, had built a home of singular beauty, complete with tasteful, upscale furnishings filling each and every room. Dark colors and conservative restraint were the dominant themes, creating a sense of peace and order. In fact, it was almost too perfect a scene.

The young man could feel a slightly malevolent *Hill House* 'watch your step' vibe lurking underneath. And while a manic, flying-blind tension was difficult to deny, by most empty mansion standards, things seemed copacetic.

Although, despite the spiffiness of the place, a harder-to-read energy lingered in the air. An energy that was either the cocktail of nerves and fatigue, punctuated by a brace of clock chimes that had just kickstarted the poor boy's heart, or the distinct possibility something spectral lurked just around a corner, ready to toss a chain-rattling Moaning Myrtle his way for the uncouth intrusion... No matter; time to pull up your big boy pants and get on with it.

He started with the tidy collection of framed photos lining both sides of the foyer. Liam moved slowly between them, eyeballing in each a single familiar face among the strangers. And though he felt the general creepiness of trespassing through another man's life, the slightest margin of something familiar brought a little comfort to his restless mind. Until he peered in closer.

... Who the Christ were all these rugrats? Children—an army of them—every shape, size, age, race, and face spread across a rolling jumble of picture-postcard settings. Each photo had Hank in the center, in one way or another, smiling away like a dog with

two tails. His overall expression was the mark of jaunty, can't-complain tranquility, one that stayed the same even as his features began to show the years.

... Jesus, had the old man crossed the last frontier into bigamy? This wasn't quite so far-fetched. Regrettably, low-rent libertine was part of an earlier, very particular set of skills. Skills acquired over an early life of questionable deeds and the personal style of a wart toad – skills so good that a demoralized parish priest thought rubber-stamping the annulment of one particularly fated union, a pretty spiffy solution to his lingering O'Shea problem.

... As expected, Liam and Keira were missing from the hit parade. Fair enough. All Hank-themed photos were safely in a flour pot, stowed under a sink, locked in the hollow of a root cellar; so fair play on that one.

Liam continued through the house, his imagination a mix of curiosity and the screaming abdabs, which rebooted from room to room. He passed through a bright, airy kitchen and down a long hallway lined with topped-up wine racks and a vintage Wurlitzer jukebox. At the far end was an entrance to a sun porch overlooking the pool and the tall hedges of an Italianate garden... There had to be *something* else familiar in this regal pile, something that might connect the young man with this world.

He made another circuit of the ground floor, but no such luck. The big man's house was an elegant setting full of bright and lovely things, but guarded by the chilly, look-but-don't-touch atmosphere of a museum. Quite tasteful in its own way, but lacking any clue about the person who put it together. That is, until Liam noticed a rather important-looking set of pocket doors... The vibes were undeniably dodgy, perhaps even a dash *Nosferatu*. Hell's bells, this *must* be the place. He rolled back the heavy tracks and surveyed the scene.

The change in temperature hit him first. He tensed up as he crept through a chilly vestibule and into the main room. He paused for a moment as a burst of laughter echoed around the cavernous space... This was really something else. Said room stretched two stories high, with wraparound iron railings and an ornate spiral staircase. The walls and floor were overlaid in alternating patterns of light ash and dark oak. Late afternoon light poured through the tall windows, casting a warm glow on a stately pedestal desk, flanked by a pair of striped Tudor chairs. Expansive Persian rugs sprawled across the floor, stopping just short of a marble fireplace at the rear. The entire shindig was framed by two tiers of inlaid bookcases, adding an impressive touch of sophistication to the place.

... Well, a vision of English pastoral life was certainly within any hayseed's divine right to cuff his carrot on a dream. But the absurd quickly found the vulgar once the young man clapped eyes on the mind-blowing number of leather-bound volumes stuffed into every bookcase nook and cranny. This in turn tripped a long-dormant, but spot-on, rubbish detector. Liam cringed. The fuzzy image of Hank by the fire thumbing through his *Marcus Aurelius* with a bucket of Colt 45s and a bag of Funyuns would be a lot like watching a chimp deal Baccarat.

The gray matter would quickly scramble and overheat into a *Scanners*-style mishap... Better to just wave the white flag on an overactive imagination and evaluate things on their own merits. Do that, and the chances of rolling around the Bokhara rugs, doubled over in belly laughs until an aneurysm hits, can be kept to the respectable minimum.

... Tsk, tsk, the old bedlamite had almost stuck the landing on a lovely slice of *Architectural Digest* Americana. No doubt achieved with the same gritty pluck that powered through any lingering flashbacks of ancient rainy nights, expired bus transfers, and a ShopRite run to pick up the weekly government cheese... A touch of subtlety and moderation might have even pulled it off. To wit:

The butcher's bill started innocently enough. Just some harmless golfing trophies and pro shop knick-knacks decorating the entrance, including a fair share of matchbooks, shot glasses, and tees from some of the better courses in the country. Toss in an autographed photo of Hank with noted small ball enfant terrible Rory Sabbatini at Augusta, and you've just about rounded out the theme. But as Liam scanned the vast library, the true scale of things quickly revealed itself.

From the collection of elegant fly fishing rigs lined neatly in the corner to the trio of nickel-plated birding guns mounted on a rack by the fireplace, a definite sense of malevolent escalation had suddenly entered the mix. But the mothership—the Comstock Lode of batshit crazy, cued to a booming John Williams score from parts unknown—revealed itself when the young man poked his head around the corner into an alcove beneath the second-story book stacks.

Before him loomed an assortment of Samurai weaponry. At least a dozen elegant katanas lined the walls, with an even larger number of short-blade daishos and tanto-lak daggers surrounding them. Each weapon, along with its wooden scabbard, rested on bamboo sword racks affixed to the walls. Each rack was a minor work of art, covered with depictions of battle or elaborate descending rows of calligraphic script.

All blades were pointed to the far side of the room to another clutch of longbows, axes, and pikes. The longbows, called *Yumi*, as per Hank's brass caption plates arrayed around the room, reached an impressive six feet in height. They were matched in sheer menace by the even taller *Naginata*, fierce looking pikes mounted on wooden stakes and capped with long, curving blades.

But the clincher in Hank's Bushido spider hole was a full set of battle armor in the center of the room, behind a tall glass case. A dark, domed helmet topped with towering stag antlers and a bright copper moon crest sat above a silver breastplate with matching steel-plated arm and leg guards. The sum of its parts was mounted on a molded body frame, posed in a noble attitude, with a blade raised like a death dealing mannequin. In all, about forty pieces of badass gear packed the tiny room.

Liam moved in closer and touched the razor-sharp edge of the nearest sword... Old Hank had really gone to town with this one. He knew his father had a taste for eccentricity, but the elder O'Shea had been a man running wild and unchecked in a well-funded theater of the mind.

His father's collection maintained a respectable and somewhat subdued appearance, though. Dominated by dark shades of blue and gold, it exuded an aesthetic more in line with serene warrior monk than grande-loco peacock. This was curious to Liam, who would have pegged the old man as more a fiery, seven-headed dragon red kind of guy on the samurai Myers-Briggs – some beastly Casanova roaming through the countryside with the medieval stand-ins for horny goat weed and a souped-up Mustang Fastback. No matter, this was the gibberish of an overworked mind, because even the dullest of blades would have grasped that they left Kansas at the front gates and stumbled into house-dropping country.

For example, could the uninitiated tell the difference between the bonded leather hilt of some mid-grade mail order prop and the exquisite twenty times folded steel of a 237-year-old Middle Kingdom katana, which, through its long storied life, had gone buck wild on many an evil and ignorant type? Nope, these were not boozy two a.m. shopping cart clicks. This reeked of rich man's eBay, of numbered paddles in balefully opulent rooms, with mystery bidders on the phone from Dubai and Beijing.

The seven dirty words rolled off Liam's tongue like a saucer-eyed vulgarian ... There must have been an entire college education malingering neatly along these walls. Certainly the price of a missed child support payment or two back in the day. But such selfish thoughts quickly faded.



If the young man steered things back to reality, Hank's toys would have more than made the grade on a mountain of medical bills or secured a less exhausted homecare nurse for an ex-wife slowly sliding down the wrong side of hourglass time... Liam shook his head and gave a bitter smile. Goodness, if Handsome Henry didn't inspire a primal brand of victimhood in others, something full of vim and vigor, long in memory, and as relentless as a drill sergeant.

Because, regrettably, in the annals of middle-aged men, this brand of high-roller lunacy has always been fashionable, if not slightly encouraged. Moreover, you could just *feel* the echoey confirmation in the air – of the Rubicon decision made in every villain's story between finding peace with what they have or strapping themselves to a Saturn V three-stager for a ride right up their ass into full-bore madness. Liam could roll with the indiscretions of the former, but the latter was as worrisome as Bruce Banner taking a fastball to the *stugots*.

The young man continued around the alcove, studying each odd and interesting thing along the way... Well, if crazy is your endgame, just make sure you have the money as they tend to leave the comfortably eccentric alone. And despite a galaxy of faults and foibles that would have crippled lesser men; his father obviously never lost a sense of the grandiose.

The young fellow huffed. Hank might have raised the buy-in to nuclear and stretched the scale to a John Holmes majestic, but the ebb and flow to his father's spiritual caginess remained blessedly sacrosanct. And while the novelty of \$3500 fishing rods and enough gear to trick out the local Shogun boggled the mind, it also spoke to a certain muscle memory comfort in just knowing that somewhere, in this impeccable, respectable pile of bricks, slumbered a Walter White worthy go-bag complete with an Argentinian passport and Castro-grade chin Merkin.

... But if the old man was holed up here in The Outback playing a loose game of mouth-breather chic, perhaps the son was grouching too hard to a gallery of one – one with a decidedly rigid agenda, many slow-cooked years in the making... Liam leaned in closer, admiring one of the elegant swords, close enough to catch the metallic scent of mineral oil on the blade.

He brought it down from the rack and did a few *John Wick* style Gun-Fu moves around the room, before gently returning the sword to its home... Well, absolution for the crazy Irishman was already off the table, but Liam could almost feel something of a cursed common instinct at work. *All men hunger for their distractions; only the scale and level of communally adjudged sanity shifts ground.*

He drifted back to the main room and studied the scene. Bewildered reporting aside, there was something *else* at work in this unfolding eye candy. Something shabby and weatherworn beneath the shiny surface, braced by a sketchy ambiance that hearkened to a bygone era—when Smokey chased the Bandit and it was socially acceptable to leave a *Playboy* or two out on the coffee table... And if the young man closed his eyes, he might have even caught the pipe-smoke freewheeling of business-casual silk pajamas, nights spent unwinding in the 'grotto', and a certain moral laxity where a man of means could tie up his disposable income in polyester and cocaine, and yet happily count himself that king of infinite space... Liam frowned. Christ, that shabby weed was still rattling around his circuit board. Time to find a counterweight.

He walked over to a sepia colored floor globe and gave it a little spin... Reading into the nuts and bolts of another man was already an uphill battle, more so if said man was only about two steps removed from a stranger-danger and the breadcrumb trail was two decades old. Basically, you are left with the interpretation of events, and who knows, you too might be a loon—the after-midnight gremlin in someone else's burn book, unfit to rock a leper bell, let alone pass judgments.

But even to the casual trespasser, *The Estate* appeared to be just your standard, time-honored national pastime of supersizing your way through the doldrums. And what was lacking, or scandalous in one's background could be remedied with a healthy bit of amplification.

Though amplification as an interior design motif was probably only half the story, and a puzzling one at that, because even if the old fella's karmic ledger was balls deep in the red on some subterranean troglodyte level, on the topside of the iceberg, Handsome Henry was a formidable creature—6'3" at least, with broad shoulders and a level gaze that towered over most things in his world. He paired this with an intemperate disposition and the occasional inclement mood, which could instantly make him several inches taller and broader.

Blessed as well with a squinty, old school *Dirty Harry* swagger, Hank was sure to be found hulking or sulking around the house when Liam was a child, running his fledgling contractor business with overheard customer service bon mots such as, "I don't give a two-penny fuck about your financial conundrums, you meat headed shit sack. Just *get me* my money." Or words to that effect.

But gully grizzly bear act aside, seeing his father's home furnishing impulses run amok should have enraged Liam further, somewhere deep into apoplectic, mad dog country. But in the great roller coaster of the moment, even over-the-top flash held a

straight shot echo to that little bit of shared past—different shape, different size, but reliably governed by the kinds of impulses that rarely waver or change.

And embracing such pseudo-slop might just be the silver bullet—that crucial something required for a wild ride up the mountain. And if the young man could somehow steady the last vibrating nerve, the rambling bad juju of the big house could feel less the backdrop for an upscale injury law commercial and something closer to a home.

### III.

## I Walk on Guided Splinters

The last hour had been a stunner. A dizzying mess with all the appeal of a slap fight with a kangaroo. Doubled over now in a painful mix of wonder and disbelief, Liam noticed the first sensible item in this room; a remarkably well-stocked liquor cabinet sitting quietly in the corner... And now the healing could begin. He ran a finger along each bottle down the line, Patron, Hendrick's, Grey Goose, but nothing felt quite right until he brought a dusty bottle up to the light – Macallan Single Malt, 22 years. Good Lord, he'd only read about this stuff; something like a car payment in every bottle. Liam handled it with a gentle reverence as he rooted around for a highball glass. He poured a little of the amber-colored fluid and turned to survey the scene.

Where does one even begin? Perhaps with the shoulder-mounted Javelina above the fireplace, staring down on him with a quizzical and questioning expression. Or maybe just go with the general spectacle of hoof and horn trophy porn arranged around the room.

Hank had assembled a who's who of the WWF calendar – posed, perched, and in possession of all the time in the world to mull their endgames as the saffron in the bouillabaisse of some back-alley Macau boner tincture, or vanity pieces for a certain cut of louche asshole American who buys his style from *Big Game Illustrated* and his ammo from Pfizer... It was ever the awe-inspiring bit to see the old man felt the need to go heels with every poor creature in the forest. Liam let out a sigh. At least the genetic roll of the dice was kinder than it might have been, and *nurture* was hopefully the lucky thumb on the scale.

The young man stepped closer to a large, framed photo of an African savannah at dusk. The sun was almost below the horizon, casting long arcs of fiery scarlet and burnt

orange across the sky. Lovely golden brome grasses and tall acacia trees framed a foreground of canvas tents, a large campfire...and his father with a Ruger 30.06 prairie howitzer slung over his shoulder. A large-bore popgun of note, renowned for its power to forthwith and with great bluster add several inches to a gentleman's Hang-Down, or at the very least scare the piss out of any rude dissent.

Liam had a glass-draining gulp and brooded. His earlier Playboy Mansion era, 'careful you don't stick to the furniture' analysis, had been generously off the mark. A few drinks in, and it was obvious the design motif was some kind of odd, coursing aggression. A pathology that could tie a room together better than any rug.

... Something in Hank's puzzle factory had finally drilled down on a nerve. As with many emotionally walled-off sorts, Liam could generally smile through the madness and store the snubs and slights in a locked room in the back of his mind. However, the downside to such living is that the few emotional release valves left to work with carry the kick of a caffeinated mule.

No matter; nothing quite prepares you for discovering your erstwhile father's extracurriculars had graduated from the relatively benign boilermaker and a fresh pack of Chesterfields to a well-funded globe-hopping menace, draping sentient creatures around the house like redneck vacation swag. All Liam could do was sip his drink and mull the odd, forlorn sense of shared dirtiness, which felt inescapably caked on and baked in, no matter how far the apple fell from the tree.

Perhaps this gene pool did shimmy and shine like a 1950's Cuyahoga River fire, and, well, tough luck on that one. But there was a strange comfort in the knowledge of the greater society collectively, even righteously, cottoning to the notion that the perpetrators of such cruel folly deserve a daily shot to the kidneys with a sack of frozen grapefruits.

... And then, something more emerged, a little glint in old Hank's eyes, a crude aspect Liam vaguely remembered from boyhood. Demented to be sure, but quite illustrative of the bandolero hustle the big fella brought to his earlier, less fanfare glorious doings—like bowling over the occasional poor soul who got too reachy-grabby with the last case of Mickey's Big Mouths during a Black Friday liquor mart stampede.

These graces had earned him the even more intimate, inner-circle-only cognomen of The Gooch. The young man refilled his glass, as generous tears did not fill his eyes. And now, sweet prince, you belong to the Ages.

Rumors of his father's prosperity kicked around the family water cooler for years. Some whispered of illegalities; others crowed of good fortune. But they were nebulous, half-formed things, blarney bluster from the crazed tongues of half-liquored up AOH mutants at some wedding or funeral.

Now, while the extended relations might have taken the proverbial umbrage with such tired stereotypes, they could probably put down their little ginger drinking fists long enough to agree that the old boy had pulled off some sort of alchemist sleight of hand.

The mystery was just *how* exactly he managed to hang his wild years on a nail and then drive it through the head of a squirrely Act I gone off the rails. His son, slowly scotching up to bulletproof and feeling as wistful as a wombat tossed in a sawdust pit, could weigh in with the confidence of a three-legged man and take a stab at the big fella's bughouse *Citizen Kane* years.

But was his father *actually* some kind of mad genius, or just another refugee from the Me Generation run amok? Another overfed, fragile soul writing the next chapter in a 75-year Deepak Chopra journey of self-actualization. And, man, what a long, strange trip it's been. From toking to coking and boner meds to hospital beds, they've kept a rapt, captive audience of their progeny, and their progeny's progeny.

And maybe a little late to the game, but still hitting all the beats of his kind was old Hank. Liam imagined him out here in the stylish hinterlands, pleased as punch to Fantastic Mr. Fox his way through an easily impressed Millennial henhouse.

... Judas Priest. He and Hank just about deserved one another. Was this the best the boy had to offer—a flatline chill with the occasional paddle-frying jolt of snark? Maybe so. Despite the heavy lift from the Macallan family, these were some twenty years now in the books. Almost a lifetime spent caretaking an inertia that eventually learned to sustain itself. The O'Shea travelling road show was a thorny knot of opinions and biases, most so long in the tooth that they had since morphed into facts.

All of it leading to this moment, and the nagging suspicion taking hold that this doom-struck, half-bright thrill jockey who took to some kind of *Gatsby* starter kit like a Build-A-Bear schematic, would never quite come into focus, remaining an eccentric, enigmatic stranger, and like all stranger danger, best regarded with a wary pitchfork eye.

Liam rested his boots on the desk and looked for his scotch-addled happy place again. But as always, like a chain rattling ghost, his thoughts took a slow circle back to

his mother and to a recent inconsolable version of himself. And how *this* was clearly not following the same script.

For her, there were no pretend blue eyes cryin' in the rain, no wildcatting in a dry soul, no diagnosable sociopathic parental detachment—in fact, *none* of the two decades of calamity, mischief, and recrimination that had Liam jockeying a desk in Bleak House that night.

But when fate finally found them, it brought the ruckus with a vengeance. For Keira O'Shea, bad fortune was far more of a slow burn than a rocket sled down a rain-slicked road. And if old Hank hit the Hard Country running, his former missus drew a whip-smart education in all the medical boogeymen hiding under the bed. The ones who turn your trusted body on you in a flash, and with a ferocity that could put the wind up Julius Caesar.

And the Maseratis in her new reality? A labyrinth of twists and turns, of raised hopes and dashed expectations. All fighting in a battle that was never meant to be won. Followed fast by a whirlwind of nervous questions, hard answers, and the growing cold-sweat sense that you've brought a knife to a gunfight. Many well-meaning people tried to help, though. Selfless and charitable in a nasty take no prisoners vocation, but all the same, a little cocky loitering in the God Lane. For what it's worth, no hard feelings. Some lifts are just too much to ask.

Days of anxious repetition settle over a house where no one can sleep. You hold a hand to comfort, maybe have a bad go at a joke, but no escaping the sense that everyone is talking, and no one says a word. There are good days, bad days, some toast and tea in you days. Decades-old shows booming from the front of the house, little twenty-two minute escapes back to easier days. Strength, essence, resolve—all dwindling, everything bleeding into smaller corners, from bricks and sticks to straw, and the wolf is circling the door. But then, at the very bottom, something ethereal arrives in sleepy inward dreams. The last bits of strength safe now in a place that nature can no longer touch with pain and decay. And in these gentle hands, his mother faded off into a peaceful sleep. And her only child had made for the most captive and attentive of audiences, with nada the drop of the brass and sass that usually colored his emotional disappearing act.

He swung his legs off the desk and snapped to attention. Happy time had circled back, and fresh bands of cigarette smoke soon filled Hank's study. Well, at least the Marlboro Man remained a reliable enough friend. Not the most reassuring of thoughts, considering these little devils only work as cocky lifestyle props when you can still flip fate the bird from a perch of youth and health.

But puff like a chimney hard enough, and even fate, which would normally beat your ass like a gong at the first sign of weakness, would have to pause for a moment in awed wonder at just how few fucks you suddenly had left to give.

... Or maybe not. Who the hell knows? These were the perils of boozy hard-man talk, particularly when you lacked the constitution for real self-destruction and your reputation for follow-through wasn't the best. But despite these handicaps, once the shock of his mother's death handed the baton to denial, the young man entered rarified air, where an all-consuming depression and daredevil euphoria lived peacefully in the same tight space. And despite the slow rolling car crash that was his life, for a few armored up months, a young man's spine had some steel because death had finally lost its fangs... Of course, until it found them again.

And now, not quite a year later, Liam sat at a table read for the sequel... Holy hell, the dust hadn't even settled, and it was time for another head-to-head with all the demons that can trouble a soul. And right beneath the commotion on the surface, in a quiet but far more durable place, lived a tension in the young man that still refused the peace in accepting some sort of privately measured finality. And with it, Liam's intransigence at the thought of Keira's lonely patch of ground beside a small chestnut tree; almost one year now left to the rain, the cold, and the snow.

Well, courting that action again sounded like a special kind of stupid. The guns blazing terror of life handing him his first real *slap* had been enough. Besides, sequels should aim higher than just a left-handed grab-ass for cash, and nothing in the big, beautiful house suggested a reason to continue the charade. And even through the shock of a raging boozier, it seemed clear – there would be no more journeys down this road. And while dying a little for one parent was a groovy trip and all, the next chapter could lean into the dark comedy.

He grabbed his drink and slow rolled the hour-of-glower to the windows facing the back of the estate. They opened onto a moon sitting low in the sky and the sounds of crickets and cicadas warming up below. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he picked up the slow pulse of late-season fireflies. Their light blanketed the meadow, ending at a line of evergreens just past the stone walls. Within minutes, the soft green light had almost blurred the horizon and the night sky.

The young man did a soft stumble pivot to the nearby couch and stretched out. His new level offered a fine view of the heavens, and despite a BAC that could rate a low octane, his eyes could clearly read the sky and its pleasant indifference to the batshit-mad internecine crumbs from the O'Shea table... He thought himself quite the monster in the



moment – a Grendel’s Grendel, the kissing bandit of Gethsemane, but mostly a pale horse Grinch; who in seven-figure Whoville, they say, his heart shrank three sizes that day.

Well, mystery, history, revelation, and condemnation – this was shaping up as quite the evening. But the *level* of pure snark had given Liam a bit of a fright. Hipster vitriol aside, he had been a decent enough fellow when he rounded up the driveway. Cursed often but rarely in earnest, drank to excess, but never to rage or ruin.

A scant two years ago, he even had a little touch of innocence and ignorance about him. Like Ferdinand, the sweet-natured, dim-witted bull from the children’s story. A happy fellow who just wanted to sit beneath his favorite cork tree and smell the flowers. That is, until the cruel-hearted village rabble swooped in and Thunderdome’d his keister into a bullring beyond his grasp... Or at least that was the hot read on the House of Henry with a belly full of liquor and the makings of a headache.

... Still, even a slap-happy bovine must suspect that for a certain breed of clip artist miscreant, there’s still some life in the afterlife. But in lieu of their physical apparition dragging a length of bull chain down the hallway shouting, “Here’s Johnny!” their legacy becomes the only record left – and something too easily twisted to ever trust.

Nevertheless, Liam had to hand it to his father; he knew how to take an emotional hostage or two. Whether it was tonight’s slingshot into a world of vast secret wealth, or some barely remembered Christmas past when the only thing coming down the O’Shea chimney was a particularly dedicated process server, the endgame for either was a spectacular 7-10 split to the marbles of the living. And the lane, frame, and game, were always by Hank’s design.

Liam poured a short glass and set the bottle on the floor. His surroundings had settled into a nice Goldilocks zone of tolerable spin, lingering somewhere near the edge... For the second straight night, he white flagged a boozy surrender. He had just played the sotted, bomb-tossing freak in his imagination, stoking a fire that his weary mind slowly watched turn to ash. He could hop down from a judgy perch with the final wisdom that this had been a piss poor séance at that. Invigorating, oddly aggressive, but thoroughly botched. For a moment, he thought to leave, but his anvil-heavy legs and the dimmest bit of common sense kept him anchored to the floor.

... How much of this even rang true? His tendency to supersize all things Hank was already whispered about in certain circles... Maybe the old man wasn’t *quite* so bad at that? Perhaps a late-blooming tiger lily in a world of ragweed, with finer unforeseen qualities cultivated over the last twenty years... A cad and a cretin to be sure, with the

welcome mat ethics of a vampire, but not quite the monster of memory, and the one growing larger with each drink.

More than Liam liked to admit, the only thing really separating the similarity of faults in father and son was, one kept his demons to the quiet self-injurious variety, and the other usually went scorched earth on the prairie.

Besides, Liam figured, who was he to talk? A hollow-legged tippler carrying on like some kind of felt up monk? He covered one eye and just about halved the spin... For certain, we're each trapped in a locked box atop our shoulders, a jakey proton-neuron casing calling the shots over fragile skin and bone. A grim awareness growing more so each passing day, along with an ants in the pants suspicion that you will never catch the rabbit on that certain missing something, the one elusive revelation unifying the field, and offering blessed deliverance from this unending, wandering hillbilly sodomy that is life. He closed his eyes and stretched... Meh.

... In truth, unresolved goodbyes can have a nice steel-plated quality in the right hands—a real Abe Froman chutzpah right up the sentimental prissiness of life. And for a particular type of sketch personality, this was the green light to jam anything resembling an emotion *way* down in the hole.

And before his last hurrah as the police blotter drama on the other side of town, the old man would've respected such resolve just fine. Hell, he might have even been proud.

Because despite the vast gulf in the blood, Hank & Son remained purveyors of a twisted commonality—a belief bordering on solemnity that some failures were just preordained, like four-bullet Russian Roulette or the experiencing of emotions, and sidestepping either was a-okay.

What was life anyway if not a mixed-bag friend? One minute letting you nod off peacefully, a little smoke in the blood and a few lagers in the bag; a late-night phone call from the police later, and it's lunging at you from the canopy like a methed-up spider monkey about to toss a helter-skelter on your poor ass.

As he pondered these issues, the room shifted again. His Goldilocks zone quickly see-sawed to a bony fingered death spiral. It was time to take stock; water was essential, but the loss of motor skills made this a tall order. The idea to flee remained appealing, but surely some karmic troll waited out past the front gates, ready to turn the boy into a hand puppet should he make a break for it. Best to just lash yourself to the ottoman and keep the faith. He slid off the couch and found a cool stretch of floor between the rugs.

From his back, Liam admired the flickering points of light on a clear and starry night. The brightness was a happy surprise to his city-dimmed eyes. As were the faint blue-gray strands of the Milky Way snaking across the horizon, dreamy and indifferent to the beastliest of single-malt sweating prophets.

He melted deeper into the floorboards, resigned to the cruel paradox that he'd come here prepared to find the face of some masked, decadent corruption. And now, as a lonely bugle played over a lost and silent battlefield, it was manifestly clear – the only beast was the one in the mirror.

... Morning brought no clarity, revelation, or reprieve; only an ear-splitting Katzenjammer and a grim date with reality. He gathered himself up and made a quick shot back to Brooklyn. For the second time in as many years, dark necessity would have him making plans for another farewell.

He never questioned propriety or his own opinions and emotions. He could have gone with his instincts – a little macabre BBQ and a Hank-sized can of Roasted Folgers – but blood is blood no matter the dilution or pollution, and the young man could still appreciate the basic Judeo-Christian notion that even a goddamn werewolf deserves the final and proper adulations.

As such, there were calls to make, catering to coordinate, and a bona fide flying blind funeral to bring safely to ground. And whatever grumblings twenty-odd years and a crazy amount of premium liquor had drummed up, the least he could do was see that the big fella had a fine shimmy down the *Soul Train* line into the ever after.

And while Hank left little in the way of family, he was flush with an impressive number of friends and admirers. They came in force, packing the rafters of tiny St. Helen of the Blessed Shroud in his father's native Schoharie, New York. Every seat was taken from front to rear, leaving some of the tardier pilgrims to mill about the doors at the entrance.

Liam looked around and cringed... Schoharie, rumored to be Algonquin for 'credit risk,' was a dodgy little speck just a lonely zombie stroll from Albany. A place not fit for man or beast, and one Liam hadn't laid eyes on since childhood. He grabbed his seat at the front and took the measure of the congregation... Not recognizing many, or really any, of these faces added a dash of the whimsical to the morning.

But the young man dutifully played his part, accepting condolences with a gracious and somber disposition. Besides, most people never know the pleasure of confused gratitude wrestling with spooked paranoia for the rights to the wheel. He

shrugged – place a notice in a few newspapers, and it’s mystery’s mischief who’ll turn up for the crudité and tea sandwiches.

Though it seemed clear, very few of the well-heeled select of his father’s *proper* years made the journey. Liam cast an eye on the assembled bereaved. This did not look like the Stepford trophy wives and multiple Maseratis of the Second Estate.

No, this group looked something else, something older, downcast, downpressed... Tired faces from the burnt-out places, tinged with rag water, bitters, and bad fortune. A place that had witnessed the beginning now came full circle at the end, honoring one of their own, the one who scrubbed the hick from his voice, jumped the fence, and broke for daylight... And sweet Jesus, if the room wasn’t thick with them.

... But why the sudden Upstate ambush? Haughty song and dance aside, Liam was, after all, *one of them*. Born in the nearby Rotunda Hospital, back in a simpler time before Handsome Henry signed them up for the midnight run lifestyle, one of shotgun shacks, free toasters with a new lease, and wondering if everyone’s family changed homes at 2 a.m. on moonless nights.

In fact, one could say the young man resembled more the bad relation than anything else – a better dressed Cousin Eddie who rolled in like a tumbleweed from the uppity suburbs with his Nancy boy airs and the finest orthodontics a schoolteacher’s health care plan could afford.

And rather than sleek Italian sports cars, this bunch looked like they just carpooled over from the dodgiest carnival the circuit had to offer. The room bristled with an electric mix of *Mayberry* nostalgia, *Twin Peaks* menace, and the even-money odds that at least one of the congregants needed to inform the police whenever they moved to a new town. And given a quick taste of side-eye, from one man’s just-clinging-to-the-middle-class-perch, one might even surmise this was the congregation’s first reunion since some other native son was taken too soon in a sawdust themed Tilt-o-Whirl mishap.

Hmm, Liam hoped these nightshade folks bore at least an equal suspicion toward the sanctimonious doucheberg in their midst. The one in the first pew, vaguely disheveled...a kind of wild, crazy look in the eyes. They say that’s the son... Good Christ, was he on drugs?

That would be a resounding *yes*. Clean shaven yet scruffy, clothed in a fine new suit that he carried with the most threadbare of airs. A weeklong Macallan and Clonazepam fugue had given him the looks of a third day in the tomb Lazarus, with just enough body spray and duct tape to confuse the lingering stares... But could this

collection of *Sling Blade* extras really grasp the sting of what was going down around them – this bilious assault on the senses now entering day six?

This was the cosmic swindle of innocently gobbling psilocybin with a head full of hop and a heart full of joy, hoping to find the face of God in every crinkly autumn leaf, then waking up half-clothed in a Home Depot shopping cart two counties away, with a freshly inked 'Boner Garage' tattoo and a rudely milked prostate. There was no Plan B.

As he went full Don Rickles on the congregation, an older woman caught his eye and offered a nod and friendly smile. It was a warm and selfless gesture that just about soaked any Holy Joe he had left in him.

... This was *shameful*; his behavior loathsome. *He* was loathsome. His aura reduced to a muddy fire, his essence a bag of dicks. And he could feel it, right through the booze and the cheekiness, that this was the shared villain in the blood – and not just the wildcat of Kilkenny snoozing up by the altar, but all of shared humanity. A default meanness scattered back in the programming, where the grandeur of one's mental house of cards is unassailable and has piss little in common with their shabby, grindhouse day-to-day.

And while not above the occasional firebombing of the townies – because, well, why not – this was something darker in Liam, a cruel-hearted clip job. How had he sunk so low? His own hobo jungle roots had once instilled the notion that the only nobility comes from punching up. And, with the exception of an odd misstep here and there, he played by the rules. However, if he had the loosest sense of 'a code', then he'd just thoroughly torched it. Unfortunately, these poor people *were here*, and the funeral for the bog man lent itself to tunnel vision just wide enough to see a red cape taunting him.

But much to his surprise, he'd been a bit premature with the carnie battle-stations. Rather, once the service began in earnest, he watched a line of strangers offer up the kindest and most reverent veneration for the departed.

Followed by an elderly priest who slowly climbed the spiral pulpit and delivered a lovely, heartfelt benediction. He finished with a story about a man who moved on to greener pastures but never forgot where he came from – a man still of the community and one to whom they were indebted for his generosity through the years. And the congregation? Not a matching set of dry eyes among them.

Liam watched the priest take a seat near the altar. The young man had been waiting on more of a homily for the anomaly, but sadly, this was not to be. He didn't want anything *too* intense, no need to read old Hank from the pulpit, but maybe weave in a little of that fire and brimstone PSA, his kind liked to dole out with the soup.

Liam groaned; they were well past the powers of fine scotch and mid-grade pharmaceuticals. He was certain now, this was it — *the fear*. And if karma was the course correction for a young man's bad juju, he could probably expect a *No Exit*-style purgatory squeegeeing carnie effluent from the mirrors of a traveling peep show.

An overdue shout of "Freebird!" signaled it was about time to wrap things up. There was, however, a final eulogy delivered by an older, vaguely familiar gentleman with a bright, affable manner and faded Galway accent. Following a few kind remarks, he closed with a traditional lamentation: "And all of done for want of wit to memory now I can't recall - So fill to me the parting glass, goodnight and joy be with you all." He descended the stairs, passed Liam, and without a word, placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled.

The boy was grateful, touched even, that this man and these strangers found a decency he couldn't offer. But he also couldn't imagine the fellow *he knew* being satisfied with such a somber, low-key affair. Liam chuckled to himself. If *steelier* sorts had been in charge, they would have gone the extra mile and offered Handsome Henry the grand validation that big-head types seek.

Vikings ride towering funeral pyre flames to Valhalla; Hindus are swept gently down the Ganges. But pyrotechnics and slow boats to eternity would never make the nut for a walking speciation offshoot like Hank. Rather, just blast that man into low-Earth orbit, Sputnik style. Get the Big Fella over that final hump and onto the astral plane proper; send those sad, dead light stars an emissary. *Astronaut*: it means 'star traveler' more or less. God speed, star traveler Hank, so long, farewell, auf Wiedersehen, good night.

... But that would be a little extravagant for the tradition, and at the end of the day, tradition still had some skin in this thing. Cooler heads would prevail, and most inexplicably, from somewhere deep within, a final ringing nerve of restraint from sullyng the family name still ran strong.

Liam marshaled his best mourning gusto — a little sadness at the church, a note of kindness at the wake, and a quiet reverence beside the grave. The procession of the faithful followed the hearse to Glasnevin Cemetery, by the banks of the Hudson River. The big fella was laid to rest on a Sunday morning near Troy, NY, guarded in reliable perpetuity between the weatherworn graves of his mother and father, aged sixty-four years.

## IV.

### The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo

Liam returned to the window and awaited the return of his missing host. He gazed down at the autumn colors of Central Park, replaying events in his mind. In the five weeks since the funeral, he managed to avoid this meeting, but Terry Quinn's persistence and an uneasy, newfound curiosity for the father he hardly knew slowly drew him in.

He drummed his fingers on the windowsill and ruminated... Well, on the limited upside, Hank was never actually jailed, arrested, or otherwise incarcerated; at least nothing he ever copped to... He had good taste in home furnishings, even better taste in booze. Bit of an unhealthy fixation with ancient weapons and large-scale taxidermy, but on the balance, a relatively sane man who rarely laid a hand on him despite the occasional Jack Torrance-style hedge maze freakout vibe. As this sad state of affairs rattled around his mind, Quinn slipped back into the office and closed the door.

He studied the young man staring out the windows. The resemblance to his father was uncanny – same rugged features, though not quite as tall or broad-shouldered... This was bound to be uncomfortable. Retreating to the outer office for that quick nip of firewater had been a wise move. Nothing caps a lousy afternoon like tying up the loose ends for a friend you'll never see again. Quinn cleared his throat and gestured the young man to take a seat across from his desk.

Terry Quinn, attorney at law, was the embodiment of a 'manner doesn't always maketh man' ethos. A sturdy fellow with a powerful frame and slightly crooked boxer's nose, he moved with the brusque gait of someone who would have been comfortable stevedoring along the Brooklyn waterfront in another lifetime...with maybe the odd side hustle busting up picket lines or collecting on delinquent widows and methadone shut-

ins. But the crisp cut of his bespoke suit, dark red power tie, and spiffy Bruno Magli oxfords all spoke to a man enjoying his lawyerly incarnation too much to dwell on such ugly speculation.

Either way, the young man suspected he'd nosed out one of the legal Burgher-Baron class he'd up till now managed to sidestep; the type of brute who inspired all manner of lawyer-at-the-bottom of the ocean jokes and even the occasional limerick. Indeed, when Mumbai organ bandits and child army warlords rate a quicker dinner invite than you, then, friend, your game is lame... The young man caught himself in another bit of spacey mind-drift. He probably should have skipped the second Xanax.

Although any sense of measured appraisal would be difficult as the collection of framed photos on the wall featuring smiling handshakes with the mayor and the governor, did little to veer the budding narrative of a world run amok. Well, at least it added a sway of mystery to the proceedings. Perhaps something more profound awaited over the horizon with this Westie-looking power player... Perhaps making nice with Terry Quinn was the way to go.

Besides, take the vehemence toward immediate family out of the equation, and the young man was generally considered a friendly and affable sort... In fact, his old Nana O'Shea liked to say her favorite grandchild had 'throwback' manners. Wise woman. But then again, she helped sire The Daft One, so grain of salt and all that.

However, the young man did have a certain formality to his manner, something that was slightly out of step with the times. He often felt adrift, like some reserved, soft-spoken gentleman who must occasionally summon the inner demons necessary to go full-Wolverine on the first drunken six-foot Times Square Elmo who can't take a hint. But at the moment, any affability was failing him... He wanted to break the ice with this enigmatic figure. But where to begin?

Quinn's desk seemed like a decent place to start. It was an imposing piece of work, made from heavy rosewood and carved with maritime-themed reliefs of whalers and cutter ships. This looked like the prize find in an old New England salvage shop; a sea captain's desk where greed-head blue blood types signed the orders sending men off to rifle all the treasures of Araby. Liam sighed. He imagined the likes of Quinn got off *bigly* crowing about the things they've collected along the way... This was a rather surly read on the room that, on most levels, was quite the opposite of charming affability. But hey, we're all allowed a mood now and then.



However, Quinn was having none of it. He showed little interest in any friendly inquiries. Indeed, this old desk had a decent story, but not for today. The young man wasn't the only one whose britches were a little too tight that afternoon. Hank had been a good friend and an excellent client. Shutting this door was not something he did with ease.

Quinn knew a little of the bad blood history in the family but didn't know any of the particulars. He did, however, suspect something was slightly *off* with the younger O'Shea. He had a quiet intensity about him, with that twitchy werewolf look the kids all get when you separate them from a phone for more than twenty minutes... Quinn wondered if he had come across another of these outrage babies, all sound and fury but no grit – a common failing of this younger crowd.

Imagine that Quinn shuddered, an entire generation remembered for its fruit fly attention span and ape strong thumbs. Hank would have understood the deal; he rolled from the oldest school like some Dust Bowl-era boxing priest. But not so much this young man, who might have shared the looks but seemingly none of the temperament or outsized charisma of the departed.

No matter, failed small talk and character assassinations aside, it was time for all parties to get their game face on. After a few more minutes of lawyer jabberwocky, Quinn was ready to get into the weeds of Hank's *other* life. He leaned forward, resting an elbow on his shiny desk, and began. In a slow, clear voice, he made his way down the page, listing each provision in the will.

... Hank had been generous with his boy. *Far more* than generous, actually. The sometime Prodigal Son had just struck the Gen X motherlode of guilt-tinged absentee parenting. Maybe 'generous' was just the easiest place to start.

Handsome Henry had been a busy little elf indeed. A bit of property here, some equities and commodities there, and a thriving construction business recently sold to a large consortium for a windfall. Add to this a host of other smaller investments and holdings, and things were rapidly approaching the limits of lunacy.

With regards to his heir without a spare, Hank's generosity included titles to two properties: the house in Westchester and another in the ritzy little summer hamlet of Watch Hill, Rhode Island. Next was partial ownership of a golfing retreat in Bermuda. 'Twelfth hole at the Mid Ocean Club,' Quinn said with some admiration.

Then came the final wisdom – the speechless young man, was the sole beneficiary to one large, doubled in the event of accidental death, life insurance policy. As that one

began to settle in, Quinn continued with a tally of itemized oddities: a vintage 1935 Brough Superior motorcycle, a 1955 Porsche 550 Spider, and, of course, legal ownership of enough samurai armor to retake the shogunate... There was one pressing item, however, a three-year old German Shepherd named Fred. Fred had been living with the handyman ever since the accident but was ready and waiting to be collected.

Before Liam could even process the thought about the new dog waiting for him, Quinn shifted to less interesting matters. "As you might expect, an estate this diversified goes through a detailed probate review. This could take up to a year, but the proceeds from the life insurance policy are yours outright. The rest? Well, that'll just – catch up."

"And of course, despite my best efforts, the government will still take a big bite, especially here in New York." Quinn shook his head sadly. "This is not a place where you want to die wealthy. He should have just moved to Coral Gables, like I told him... Now, Florida? Nevada? *Great* places to exit this world in financial peace."

Quinn shifted gears back to lawyer speak, detailing, somewhat cryptically and most curiously, a sum of \$2.7 million to a secondary beneficiary... As Liam wondered what Hank might be hiding behind the curtain, Quinn wrapped things up with a neat bottom line ribbon.

Liam stared at the figure on the notepad. It was a pretty goddamn impressive ribbon. It was the kind of money where you could bury your head in the sand for quite a while – but not quite forever.

But even more mind blowing, the tremendous bounty thrown his son's way represented only a fifth of Hank's overall wealth. The remaining assets were to be placed in smaller trusts for a few different charities. Liam fell back in his chair, feeling slightly disconnected from his body... His father had indeed been a Gordon Gekko baller of the first order, cutting through the business world like The Juggernaut going through drywall.

... And in the span of a few moments, all the surety defining Hank's canonical indifference was toppled, and succeeded by a growing sense of confusion, a condition that Liam lacked both the wisdom and wiliness to conceal. Instead, he played the mental possum, rolling one of Quinn's pens between his fingers and staring at the fair-haired lady in the painting.

"Well, that's about it." His father's lawyer let it hang there for a moment. "I think it's all fairly cut and dry. Hank did not include his second and third wives in the will. Now, there is a possibility that his third wife, one Miranda Tate, might contest parts of

this, as they still had some shared business interests." Quinn looked up with a wry smile. "But we won't worry about that."

Before Liam could ask what a Miranda Tate was and was she old enough to take across state lines, Quinn pushed several more documents across the desk. "If you would please, sign and initial these."

Liam reached over and signed the last of the papers, his hand moving robotically as his mind struggled to keep up. As he sat back in the chair, a heavy weight settled on his chest... It was quite a thing to have your entire fatalist certainty suddenly thrown under the bus and replaced with the sucker punched reality that everything you had known was now twisting in the wind.

The forces were gathering for some manner of panic attack, and the urge to flee was strong. But that was for softer sorts, and he'd rather rawdog an angry hornet's nest than be one of those fools who goes all wobbly when life serves up a wildcard. He rubbed his eyes, had a few deep breaths, and spoke with all the deliberation of a man trying to pretend this wasn't the most insane thing he'd ever heard.

"You'll have to forgive me," Liam said. "This is *a lot* to process all at once... I mean, I'd heard the occasional *rumor* that Hank was doing well... I even spent a night at that weird house up in the country." But then Liam gestured toward the neat stack of documents between them. "*But all this?*" He let out a little chuckle. "What did I miss?"

Quinn looked at him but remained silent. The lawyer had a fine poker face, calm, still, and betraying nothing. Liam's newfound friend just didn't seem to share in the delicious reversal of fortune playing out before him. Liam sensed he wasn't properly *reaching* this man. It was time to slide into his best orphan street urchin bravado.

"I'm just having a hard time following here," Liam said, sitting up straighter. "Hank passes away, and two weeks later, I get a call to come over and discuss the composition of his estate? His estate!" The young man cackled. "Francis Henry O'Shea, having enough sticks to rub together to have an estate worth meeting about? That's just about the mother of cosmic perversions."

Quinn nodded. "I'm sure this is all quite a surprise."

Liam leaned in with a conspiratorial flair. "If I woke up tomorrow with my head stapled to the carpet, I'd be less surprised... You know, part of the reason I stayed away so long was the expectation that this would be the first act in some god-awful legal knockdown, drag out, with an army of creditors seeking their piece of my father's

overleveraged life... Seriously, it's been giving me the night terrors just thinking about it."

"Well, fortunately for you, that was not the case."

Before Liam could decide if that was a shot or not, Quinn launched into a story he seemed eager to tell. What followed was the rise of Handsome Henry, Inc., an inspirational tale of how an occasionally inebriated adventurer had chanced upon a fortune. The opening move came twelve years ago with a lucrative divorce settlement from well-to-do wife number two. Poor woman; she came in with good intentions and a bit of cash, and she left poorer on both counts.

In the past, Hank would have burned his last dollar before sunset, funneling it right back into the gaming and hospitality sectors, and the local racetrack or neighborhood dice game would've seen a fine spike in profits for a month or two.

But Hank took his seed money and threw it into something he genuinely understood: sales. Selling himself, that is. His father was intimidatingly persuasive, if nothing else. Mr. Warmth could sell sand to the Bedouins and lobster rolls at a Purim carnival. But instead, Hank put his unusual charm and seed money into the construction business, specializing in the kind of municipal projects that get bid out for state and county contracts.

There were lots of purveyors of the public interest lined up, ready to be wined, dined, and feted, and the big fella was there to work every one of them. Hank even put his vices to work, hosting blackjack weekends at Mohegan Sun with the local political players and August Saturdays at the stately racetrack in Saratoga Springs with various juiced-up businessmen and members of the New York State Assembly. He might have even known a few of them from the Albany of his youth. No matter, Handsome Henry could work them all.

... Despite a growing mountain of evidence to the contrary, Liam could not imagine a future without Hank as his favorite straw man, straight from Central Casting. It was forever frozen in his mind; a hard estimation that made little allowance for change. But something had shifted. Maybe twenty years of a mid-life crisis had finally been enough? At any rate, his father reached an age when mortality starts creeping up like an eighteen-wheel tailgater. And while he never quite managed the full jump from knuckle dragger to genteel upper-cruster, his consolation prize was an unusually talented financial advisor.

With his shrewd guidance, Hank flourished in one of those long bull market upcycles... The Donegal bogman hitched his first star to a little gateway IPO called Netflix. Liam's stomach churned at the thought of his father doing the George Jefferson victory shuffle up and down Park Avenue, suitably impressed with his shrewd dealings and bare-chested financial acumen.

American lives are not supposed to have second acts, but Hank had found one. Hell, he might have even found a couple of them. However, as any seasoned vagabond can attest, you can run, but you can't outrun your own shadow. A home awaits where many of the same problems persist, and your war chest is not enough to ease the tremors of restless hands. So, after squaring away his love for the finer things, Hank jumped headfirst into a world of gentlemanly philanthropy.

With Quinn's guidance, they set up the Madeleine Mary O'Shea Memorial Foundation. Yep, even Liam's grandma got in on the action. But she would have been proud of this one; her black sheep finally making good.

The Quinn and Hank inner circle came up with a variety of tax-friendly, civic-minded programs, but none more successful than the 'Sturdy Wings Initiative' – a haven for underprivileged kids with the brains and grades to match."

The Sturdy Wings were mostly city kids, primarily from Boston and New York, who spent their summers glamping on the shores of Lake George at a retreat Hank had built. For many of them, there were scholarships waiting – full rides to the escape route of their choice.

Quinn said the charity would be funded from the \$2.7 million figure he'd mentioned earlier... Liam had no problem with that. Had decorum allowed, he would've urged his father's lawyer to auction off the cars and the little knife collection outright, and donate the proceeds to the tiny scamps. Not everyone should have to wear their flair while turning tables at a Chotchkie's or manning the Circle K overnight just to get an education – not unlike the original O'Shea initiative.

Either way, Liam's name had been left off all of Hank's Second Reel highlights. The trusts had administrators, and the whole thing would more or less run itself. "Rest assured," Quinn said. "It's all in good hands."

## V.

### Monkey Gone to Heaven

At that point, Hank was only sixty, but it had been a *hard sixty*. The go-for-broke lifestyle and three failed marriages must have finally stirred something like self-reflection. Estranged from his family, the best he could plan for was a memory elevated by the admiration of strangers. He hoped the reputation of a respected, civic-minded businessman would be enough to make the grade.

The last years of his life were spent in the single-minded pursuit of his projects, possessed like a man who could already feel his time slipping away. But never, in his wildest dreams, did he think wet leaves on an old dirt road would do him in... Saving waifs from a burning building or pulling some Ethan Hunt style heroics with a runaway suitcase nuke—he could accept such things. But not the neighbor's orange tomcat standing out in the middle of the road... At least Crookshanks made it home.

The young man listened as Quinn spun his tale with something close to reverence. Liam smiled; the big fella was in the zone. His sudden gift of the gab was a little jarring, but Liam admired the hutzpah in the delivery. He imagined Quinn would have made a fine courtroom lawyer. In the wizard's hands, Hank's storyline had steered from a dime store penny dreadful to some elegant bit of highfalutin self-made Americana legend; a modern day P.T. Barnum, Jay Gatsby, and Al Bundy rolled into one. Quinn wrapped up his story with a maudlin nostalgia in his voice.

"It's a hell of a thing when a good man is taken before his time."

Liam nodded sympathetically... Jesus, the poor fool. Spend too much time in Hank's orbit, and the Stockholm syndrome must kick in. But Quinn was going to have to bust out his best Chewbacca Defense if he thought he was going to slide this bit of revisionist misdirect past the young man.

A better hot topic might've been: How does a man finally pull the trigger and

abandon his first life? Does he dream it up and simply go for it, or is it one of those long, walk-to-freedom kinds of struggles—one that needs just a bit of venal or drunken courage to push him over the hill? Who cares how he gets there? Does such a lounge-lizard charmer ever stop to think about the past and wonder where he found the ice in his veins to just walk away?

... The young man had worked himself into a tizzy. He felt his sudden Kung Fu death grip on the pen and the painful clenching of his jaw. He was loading up the next broadsides when, almost like a gift, a zennish sense of calm came over him. Without realizing it, he had finally crossed some internal tipping point—one where you've just bashed the holy hell out of some poor bastard, and now you can't help but feel a little bit of remorse at your own venom.

... Perhaps it was the light of day, all scotch free and clear headed, or the pure shock and awe of his father's generosity, but Liam felt a strange pang of queasy sympathy for Handsome Henry and his desperate mischief-making ways. His father's means of production may have been a little gonzo, but Liam recognized a shared impulse that could have driven Hank.

It's a terrifyingly easy thing to lose sight of your self-deceptions and personal pipe dreams. Your wealth and possessions can be the lipstick on a pig for a while, but most men eventually meet at the same cold-sweat junction—a desperate crossroads where a man is confronted with the stark possibility that he is, quite possibly, not the *chosen one*, and that Morpheus is not waiting down the hallway with the red pill in his palm.

In fact, he's pretty much qualified to speak and advocate only for himself, and even that proved a king hell climb most of the time. Most men just suck it up, nurture a naughty vice or two, and get on with it. Other more mercurial, delicate sorts, especially those with healthy bank accounts, might find themselves leaning into a benevolence of the check-writing variety, with fingers crossed that the law of averages plays out, and some late-inning action can repair the wild years.

And who knows, had Liam been willing to squeeze a little bit of water from the stone, he might have even seen a gentler truth for his father—that for some men, there's a bridge that can't be built between the self-serving elegance of their nobler instincts and the self-destructive carnival of their day-to-day. But beneath the elaborate toys and trappings, Liam could recognize that desperate sense of *possibility* slipping away.

But as he searched for a 'pleasant' memory of Handsome Henry to give a little backbone to this peculiar instinct, he instead landed on a brown-acid flashback of an epic

public shaming from many years ago. The young man snapped back to attention. Charity and paternal goodwill were clearly not in the cards that afternoon, no matter how nifty the parting prizes.

Was this approach dangerously disingenuous? Absolutely. But then again, so is the raggedy ass sincerity of strike-three families ... He looked across the desk and felt a little sad for Quinn. He was about to have his mellow severely harshed. The young man leaned forward and continued.

“Would you like to hear a story?”

Quinn looked up from his papers, slightly curious. The young man could feel the coils unwinding now, the words finding themselves.

“I haven’t many reliable memories of growing up with Hank, but I do have one. When I was seven or eight, the Ford dealership sent their collection people out to pay us a visit late one night. It seems their bank didn’t get the humor in a playful game of catch me if you can, especially when their bills are getting returned with perverted suggestions of anatomical impossibilities.”

“In the end, it was decided that repossessing my mom’s Crown Vic would be the best way to restore the natural order of things. And, so it goes, two burly fellows show up in the middle of the night to collect, but they’re just a bit clumsy in their trade, and soon manage to spook every dog in a five block radius.”

“Once the alarm sounded, Hank came crashing through the front door like a tornado with my Rawlings little league bat in one hand and a still-warm fireplace poker in the other, shouting, ‘Call the cops! Some dego bastard just stole the car!’ At this point, the old man launches the poker like some backwoods Olympian, misses the mark completely, and nearly takes out my poor dog Clyde in the process... Well, by now we, and I mean the neighborhood *we*, are all out on the sidewalk in our unmentionables, watching the lights of my mother’s car growing smaller in the distance, as our guy stands there defiant in his wife-beater PJs, railing on the cocksuckers who did him in.”

“That was more your average evening out our way.” A grim chuckle left his throat. “Anyway, the fallout from the Battle for Clinton Street was pretty severe. About six months later and Hank was gone.”

The young man leaned in closer. “Let me ask you something. Polite society, they *never* caught on to any of this? The rubbing shoulders with a guy who could follow you into a revolving door and come out ahead?” Quinn looked at him a bit cockeyed, but



there was no need for an answer; the proof was laid out in a stack of papers in front of him... And with that, a grim truth settled in—he owed his father a modicum of bitter pill respect for the gutsy artistry of the grift. Liam smiled. “Well done, Francis. Well, done.”

Quinn shrugged—another *bullseye* for the young man... But much like a pediatrician gets used to wearing toddler vomit, estate attorneys learn to roll with the occasional reading of the will psychodramas. Best to keep things moving though, before the furniture started flying. He bit his tongue and continued.

“Well, families, they’re never easy, are they?” Quinn flashed a practiced sympathetic smile. “Moving on, I realize this has all been a bit of a shock. I’m sorry to throw it all at you at once, but... you’re not the easiest man to track down.”

“Yeah, my apologies... It’s been a lot to process these past few weeks.”

“We got it done, though. That’s what matters.” Quinn glanced at his antique clock. “Anyway, we’re almost finished. If I could just get your autograph on a few more of these.”

And just like that, with the thinnest of fanfare, the whole thing came to an end. A few more signatures, and the who, the where, and the how much were all official or at least *in motion*.

... What was the etiquette in such a situation? This was some wild, virgin territory. He would have to guess his way out of this office. But short of any workable answers, Liam collected Hank’s gift with the look of a man who had just been zapped by lightning in a clear sky desert. That his benefactor was his occasional nemesis, nee daddy, might add a couple of years to the final therapy bill, but, well, he could handle the copays.

Hank’s lawyer gathered the documents and placed them in a folder. He looked up, and for the first time that afternoon, his mood shifted a bit—he even smiled. It was a strange one, Cheshire-like, bright and full of teeth. The two men talked for another ten minutes or so, mostly about the mechanics of how everything would work. When both were satisfied, Quinn extended a hand for one of those aggressive power grasps. He came around the desk to walk Liam to the elevators.

Quinn was still trying to get a handle on the young man. That walk down memory lane seemed to put the wind right up him... Never saw anyone react to free money quite like that before though... Maybe the boy was dropped on his head at some crucial early stage? No matter, the bill was in the mail.

However, Quinn still had the look of a man waiting to have his ring kissed or at the very least polished a bit. It was he, after all, who tracked the boy down with due diligence and led him ass backwards into a small fortune... And just for the record, he had the Chewbacca Defense locked and loaded, ready to bring the rumpus on behalf of his buddy's maligned reputation... But then he thought better; commerce was still king, and the newly flush orphan would most certainly need *representation*... It was the circle of life, Hank would understand.

"You know, Liam—"

But Liam wasn't listening... He should have called *shenanigans* from the get-go. Hank always managed to return somehow, like a particularly dickish boomerang, always snapping back with some new twist to spook the horses... Various attempts at righteous expropriation over the years by Liam's mother had met with only middling success. When it came to making himself scarce, Hank could melt away like the Viet Cong after sundown.

But on the limited upside, some men were better lost than found. Sure, there were the various whispers and musings — taking third place in the Paris-Dakar Rally, smoking kif with Andy Kaufman in a Bangkok karaoke bar, or maybe just collecting heads on a slow boat snaking up the Congo... That or whatever else those skullduggered cranks at the O'Shea's Hibernian lodge could Greek Chorus up on a Saturday night after one too many sherries.

... Liam's brain was still reeling from the bushwhacking, leaving him off-kilter, and with his head so far down a rabbit hole that he wasn't *quite* registering what just happened. A three-second pause would gloriously reveal that his days of riding the L-Train on a hot August afternoon, as the breakdancing day shift spun away inches from his face, on his way home to brood about it in a \$2,750-a-month upright coffin, were, in fact, *over*.

He took a breath and thought about the cigarette waiting for him down on the sidewalk. The gut punch phase of shock was slowly subsiding. He could feel his knees steadying a bit... Quinn was babbling on about something, but who knew, he could have been describing the drifter's head he kept in his meat freezer, the young man's mind was elsewhere.

Although there was the curious question of how well the lawyer had known the old man. The sad fact was he had spent more time with Terry Quinn in an afternoon than he had with Hank in the last ten years. His lawyer might have the straight dope on a few

remaining items.

... And in ways both literal and otherwise, this was the last 'official' sanction he would ever have with his father's side of the family. The Freedom Bird was leaving, and the remaining O'Shea bench was pretty thin. Aside from Liam, Hank had a brother in California he never talked to, maybe ten or twelve cousins scattered across the map, and that was about it. There were almost no eyewitnesses left to the early part of Liam's life, and he had more than a few lingering questions.

But Quinn beat him to it. "I noticed your university email. You're in graduate school, right?"

"Yeah, I just started my last year."

"What are you studying again?"

"Law school." Liam gave Quinn a friendly smile. "Cats out of the bag, I guess?"

"Well, look at that, a future member of the fraternity. I was not aware."

In truth, Hank rarely mentioned a family at all. One of the few cards Handsome Henry kept close to his chest was any mention of his early years... Enough with this hornet's nest, Quinn thought. "So, what kind of law do you want to practice?"

"It took me a while to figure out," Liam said, his voice lifting a bit. "But I'm going into criminal law. If I finish strong this year, there's a halfway decent chance I could get a spot in the Brooklyn DA's office... Have you heard about the cybercrime initiative that they have—"

"In *this* city?" Quinn interrupted, aghast. He stopped them in the hallway. "Let me share something with you—old lawyer to young lawyer. Criminal litigation sounds all righteous in a lecture hall and looks exciting on TV, but it's a truly horrible place to be. You'll be underpaid and overworked, no one will appreciate your efforts, and the reward? An occasional perjured misconduct complaint."

Quinn leaned in closer. "And, I tell you, it's *especially* ugly here in Gotham. You spend the best part of your career punching the ticket on small time offenders who can't afford a decent lawyer, or caging mad dog Odessan gangsters from Brighton Beach, guys who fear nothing that walks on less than three legs and have a memory that could fill a book. A few decades of that grief will drive a man to distraction... Quite a heavy price to pay for a gold-plated watch and the right to double park wherever you please."

"I'm not sensing you have a great opinion." Liam chuckled.

The older man shrugged. “Well, it’s just that I have a lot of colleagues who went down that road. They were well-intentioned types too. Got blindsided when idealism crashed into reality.”

Big Terry Quinn enunciated “idealism” as if it were the hard-charging business end of a medical probe out to violate every one of his sacred orifices. And while the young man didn’t care for the insinuation toward naiveté, he also didn’t take offense with the idealism dig. Liam wasn’t sure where he fell on that scale anyway.

Idealist types were usually the children of privilege, not hand to mouth super-lifers already one-hundred and ten thousand in the hole for their idealist education... Yep, hard to play a windmill slaying knight when you’re stone ass broke. No arguments there. Harder still to shake the immutable fact that Liam took an Uber to get here, and Quinn had a ninety-thousand dollar Jaguar in the basement. Noble aspirations to the civic-minded and egalitarian roll small and queer in this league.

... Curious questions, indeed. And if Quinn had pumped the brakes on the sales pitch foreplay for a hot minute, Liam might have had the chance to ask one. If so, he would have started with, ‘What did all this *really* mean?’

A man who barely acknowledged his existence had just thrown him a lottery lifeline, with no strings attached. And, well, despite the occasional daydream to the contrary, people were not in the habit of handing Liam vast sums of money out of the blue... But like most things concerning the inner workings of his father’s brain, Liam and his active imagination were left to fill in the gaps, and usually in some Paddy hyena meets Jack the Ripper-style direction.

But in some future, more clear-headed analysis, one removed from the prejudice and biases of the moment, a possible, albeit flakey, logic comes into focus. The foundation of Hank’s firewall rested on a single shaky column of belief that families, even squalid, intransigent ones, where the tree regrettably didn’t fork enough for its own good, were still little empires of sorts. And like most empires worth their name, when the idealized version starts to crumble, they too will wither and fade away.

Maybe it’s the breakneck shooting star variety, or perhaps just that progressively inbred three-generation slow drift to perdition, but either way, the deal gets done.

However, when you’re a one-and-out man like Hank, you’re in a special lonely hearts club where a respectable legacy becomes the best currency you have left... Is that what this was, the young man wondered, as he checked for his phone and wallet, a none too subtle beyond the grave negotiation for ground cover?

Had Quinn just earned \$15,000 for refereeing some kind of far out financial séance? And if so, was Liam the real insurance policy trading hands that day; the last man standing in the family story, now bestowed with a very generous reminder that silence is golden.

"You should think about this," Quinn interrupted. "Private wealth management. It's not too sexy, I'll grant you that." He patted Liam on the back. "But once you see the rest of my bill, you'll know why I'm braving it in the private sector."

For a second Terry Quinn was close to likable but then he spoke again. "Listen, do this for a living and you'll never have to look over your shoulder for some discount Cosa Nostra wannabe, or other socially maladjusted deviant you helped put away... Much healthier to have the deviants paying your bills."

Liam shrugged. Well, at least Quinn was upfront with his general sense of institutional disdain. And such candor in this profession just about conferred something of an enlightenment... However, Quinn's attention was already down a very dedicated road, and he would be unreachable in their short time left. Liam sighed, well, if he couldn't get a word in, maybe he could wind him up a bit.

"So, you knew my father well?"

"Yeah. We went back about ten years. I met him at the University Club down near Rockefeller Center. We were paired up for a racquetball tournament. He was going through a rough patch, and I put him together with a good divorce firm. Anyway, lots of road behind us since then."

Long time, indeed." Liam grabbed his coat from the rack, giving Quinn a half-smile. "By the way, if I skipped past you at the service, I apologize. I wasn't exactly firing on all cylinders."

... The young man was many things that funeral day, but unobservant wasn't one of them. And while he might have tossed around the 'hellos' like manhole covers, he did peruse the condolence book with a fine eye, if just to figure out who the hell those people were.

"Unfortunately, I wasn't able to make it." Quinn said.

"That's a shame." Liam nodded at the fair weather biller. "You missed a memorable one."

"How did it go? A big turnout, I hope?"

... He could have told him the truth. Kind of an understated gathering, a fine service, a proper and somber wake. In all, a rather respectable, entirely dignified affair, with just a couple of mourners offering to guess Liam's weight for a fiver. But why bother with that? Tell your story strange enough, he figured, and with any luck this could be the last official sanction he would ever have with Terry Quinn.

"Big crowd." Liam said. "Standing room only... Another twenty or so people and we would have needed crowd control. We went full traditional, of course."

Quinn smiled. "Hank was certainly *proud* of his heritage."

"And we served it up. Stopped the clocks and drew all the curtains." Liam leaned in and sighed. "There are two kinds of people in this world, those who whisper around the deceased and those who place their drinks on the coffin... We needed more of the former. Other than that, just your standard: butter and onion sandwiches, seven choruses of *The Long Black Veil*—a few fistfights in the parking lot. Everyone singing at the wake, lots of 'the black stuff' and big fish stories all around... Hank would have thought it the good craic."

The grin on Quinn's face collapsed, but he thought on it for a moment, "Yeah, I suppose he would've enjoyed that kind of thing. Hank liked a big party, lots of people."

"He certainly did."

The elevator slowly ticked off the floors.

"So, give some thought to what I said." Quinn rested a hand on Liam's shoulder.

Liam nodded blankly, wondering what he had missed.

"Any time you need advice or counsel, or just a friendly ear, give me a call." Out came the Cheshire teeth again, bright and frightening. "It's my obligation to help you navigate these things. At least, those were Hank's wishes."

"His wishes?"

"I believe he wanted our relationship—this long partnership—to endure. You have a large responsibility to suddenly manage. Hank envisioned my acting as a kind of advisor to you, a guiding hand to help navigate things."

... Liam, already stewing about that funeral crowd-control dig actually being the truth, cringed at the thought of being a talking point for Hank and his lawyer. Lord knows what microscopic cog in the catastrophic plan they had intended for him, but all the same, the young man just didn't care. His mind was already across the river, and an

'Au revoir, gopher' style exit was imminent.

A clean cut was needed. The future was out the door, not down another dead end road leading back to Handsome Henry, lingering in the psychic wings like a twenty year belch from a bad onion... Not many people get a chance to erase and rewind, and even fewer have it handed to them like a winning Wonka ticket. All things considered, Quinn could keep the noise, Liam had a dog to pick up.

The elevator doors opened. Liam paused in the entrance.

"Mr. Quinn, I want to thank you again for all you've done. But to be honest, given the...unique nature of the family dynamic, I think a fresh start is needed. After Probate, I'd like to close out my portion of the Estate assets." He nodded thoughtfully. "I think it's just better that way."

Before Quinn could reach for that final bedrock reserve of bullshit, Liam reached over and gave him a firm handshake, looked him in the eye, and flashed the best smile he could muster; bright and frightening, until all that remained was the grin. "See you in the funny papers."

The doors closed. It was cool and dark in the lobby... Big Terry Quinn, raconteur, life coach, and rent boy to the 1%, rarely settled for little, and he was not going to settle for that.

"I'll get him," he chuckled and started back to the office, "and his little dog too."

## VI.

### The Day We Caught the Train

(about nine months later...)

The young man sipped a vodka gimlet 37,000 feet over the Atlantic Ocean. He straightened up, arching his back as a slight ache ran through his body, an ache resolving toward a well-realized tension running down the length of his spine. He glanced at the video screen in front of him. A map with all the colors of the North Atlantic lit up the dark surroundings, and there sat in the middle, trapped between Iceland and the Hebrides was the small green icon of an airplane.

With nervous eyes he watched and waited and waited and watched, but the little bastard refused to move, frozen in some kind of cruel static. Liam was quite certain it was mocking him now. He'd been at this for some time, sleepless, with a sudden case of the Jimmy legs, as half remembered news stories about deep vein thrombosis danced through his head.

He rubbed his red-rimmed, glassy eyes. Too much bad air, stale air, passing through the lungs of three hundred of your new acquaintances; just a swirling petri dish of biology locked down the narrow aisles of a midnight run. He made an effort to blink now and then, but his mind was drifting to other places. An otherworldly sense of space and time had kicked in. His sense of gravity, ability to focus, and ability to reason, long since compromised by the pitch and roll of the plane, and the last seven hours of a fermented free for all that he'd thrown his weight behind with a special devotion.

It began innocently enough with a couple of Moscow Mules back in the Departures lounge at JFK. Quite the eye opener at \$23 a pop but at least poured with a generous hand. They did the job nicely, ratcheting down the jitters a notch or two. Getting through the airport had been a bit of a clown show – lots of extra grumbling, shouting, and bad



vibes all around.

These were worrisome omens at the outset of an adventure, so the young man repaired to the Emerald Sky Lounge where he drank steadily and pondered his situation. He left a large tip and made his wobbly way to the gate, where he was soon deposited in a roomy lay flat seat near the front of the plane. Before he could ring the ding sign for bartending support, a 'welcome aboard' glass of something was handed to him by a pretty freckle faced flight attendant. Feeling rather braced, he sank back in the spacious seat, on his game, and geared up for the twilight takeoff. A gulp of water and a pinch of Xanax were the perfect finé as the engines revved heavy and Jamaica Bay zipped by the windows at unmentionable speeds.

As the big jet cleared the tower, Liam tossed a little bottle into his bag and took a deep breath. Sweet Xanax to the rescue again. It was a fine medicine, gentle and forgiving, but like all the fun drugs, not meant to be chased with half a distillery – a caveat he would just as soon gloss over. For his part, the collective brain could stand to consider the merits of a sedative with a little more wiggle room – preferably something alcohol friendly, age-defying, and non-habit forming. He sighed, knowing it was just another sad snapshot of the age – and the morality-based rage that rears its ugly head wherever a little kinky fun might be had. And this evening's impromptu lifestyle experiment would just about fit the bill.

His freckle faced young friend was eventually relieved by an older, rather stern-looking...veteran. Liam studied her for a moment, a lot more wisdom and command in those eyes. Eyes with a fierce steadfastness and a Nurse Ratched, 'fuck around and find out' twinkle that hinted at heavier things, like zip ties and a blast of Mace if you got on the wrong side of right.

Good Lord – were these women actually armed? No matter, he was probably safe here. She was, after all, handling the middle of the plane, and the passenger is generally right ethos of Business Class. Just thirteen rows of good folks expecting something more exciting than free gin and tonics with their snack boxes. But even this rarified crowd was still one curtain short of the final destination, a tiny three-row cocoon at the front of the plane reserved for a level of wealth where even having to share the jet was an embarrassing kind of slumming it.

Working class reflections from 13A aside, he'd be lying if he didn't admit it was interesting being on the other side of things. He'd spent his whole life back in the cattle pen, wondering what sort of *Eyes Wide Shut* perversions were playing out up front. Was it a complimentary red apple ball gag and amyl popper free for all beyond the curtains?

For a naive pilgrim, the creepy possibilities of the unknown abounded... On the whole, it seemed far safer in the places he had grown accustomed to, and even if it had a bit of the correctional facility vibe, at least he knew the deal in Coach.

But a quick glance at the 'in-crowd' was a letdown. The big reveal was just a hefty swath of pleated pants and judgy glares... This bunch looked like a Brooks Brothers had just detonated over an AARP convention. It was the elastic khaki test as far as the eye could see—jiggling buttermilk paunches, Botox grins, and a vague Kipling-Kurtz D-bag air of corrupt entitlement... But that might have just been the deep-seated generational ageism and cigarette withdrawal talking. Otherwise, this was just your standard Boomer crowd, out and about, still riding the snake on a never-ending sensory jag.

Thankfully, the meal service arrived. Continuing the young man's variations on a theme, two small bottles of a solid pinot noir accompanied a nice selection of artisan cheeses, followed by a Tournedos Rossini in Madeira sauce. All of it served on crisp linens, porcelain, and bone china etched with Celtic harps... This felt otherworldly. A civilized meal with no one reclining their entrée into his lap, premium hooch, and plenty of super collagen night balm from the little swag bag. He could make a habit of this. That is, if he had any appetite. He picked at his meal before downing the last of the wine and letting things mellow to a slightly reassuring haze.

But while this was all fine and well, the medicine had its limits. Small creeping signs of reality began seeping in around the margins... Who *were* all these strangers? What in the hell were they doing out there, strapped in these seats, barreling along at seven hundred and fifty feet a second? Disjointed, half-formed gibberish danced around the young man's mind—all of it a mess, all of it starting to conflict with his instincts, the ones wired back there somewhere heavy in the caveman DNA.

At its heart, air travel is an odd form of voluntary entrapment—a coffin confinement with a Jonah and the whale sense of doom that should get any sane man sweating. The size of these things alone was too much: a huge hollowed-out tube with only one and a half inches of lowest bidder aluminum separating you from becoming some future trivia night question that most people get wrong.

Dig into the armrests, let your inner creature rear up, cursed as you are with a photographic recall of most every air mishap since the Hindenburg... They were outmatched. These things *go down*, down in big fiery masses, all existence quickly rendered to a cable news screen crawl. Maybe a moving 'thoughts and prayers' style sign-off from a solemn, baritone-voiced suit—the estimable Steve Dallas in his haberdashery best, rambling on about the horror before cutting to the third Billy Mays OxiClean ad of

the hour.

Was that it? Was that the endgame? Twenty-nine years of a delicate work in progress, stranded in the middle of a half-baked incarnation? Is this how the little experiment would be ushered into the Great Beyond, by a self-fellating bobble head, grown at some news anchor pea pod farm?

And what about all the nonsense it's taken to get here, the careful cultivations, the random bits of messiness, the slick victories, and tender mercies – all of it just riding on fate at this point... Most people can suppress these flashes of madness with a nap and a movie. But for the well-tuned throwback types, the ones always looking for the next *heaviness* around the corner, these subtle acts of faith and surrender become a little more of a reach.

But unlike your average caveman, Liam now had money on the cuff and bad decisions at the ready. A little extra padding bought the leg room and breathing space needed to ponder his condition. But what he really wanted was for his poor lizard brain to take another thump from the bar cart, one so severe that not even Wesley Snipes dropping through the ceiling would rate a nod.

Either way, the medicine was running low... So where was she, that stern eyed lady with the keys to the larder? Perhaps it was time to switch things up and ditch the wine. Nix the gentle libations and move on to the soul-numbing ones. Yes, straight vodka with an extra dash of lime, a fine drink for a lapsed Catholic, if ever. He gave the call sign a ding. She appeared at once.

The head screw took a tender line with him. Without saying a word, she seemed to grasp that they were at threat level midnight. In airline lingo, it's what's also known as 'being a pussy,' and it's best to treat the thing with kid gloves. And why not? As long as they didn't attack the crew or relieve themselves on the cockpit door, she could keep these little games afloat. Give them what they want, but always keep a finger on the chicken switch; one good shot will have an agitator rolling in the aisle for ten minutes looking for their eyeballs. Hopefully, it wouldn't flow down that road. Bear-grade pepper spray tends to linger in tight spaces, and the marketing people generally frown on gassing the preferred customers.

She served several rounds to the ashen-faced passenger in 13A. Each time she arrived with his drink, Liam gave her the grateful eyes of a proud man who realized he was being handled with care. And while a steady stream of hooch calmed the edges of a jittery psyche, it also trapped his thoughts in a rattling circular din. A trembling unease

that meandered nervously at first before falling pleasantly into rhythm with the drone of the engines and the enveloping darkness of the cabin.

... What, after all, is air travel, if not a cruel exercise in boredom? Boredom bookended by the occasional jolts of sheer terror. The claustrophobia and stress positions were baked into the engineering – but tonight’s thrill ride was courtesy of some bad air they picked up back Newfoundland way. The pilot came over the intercom and chimed something about ‘slight bump and moderate chop.’

Slight bump and moderate chop? Hmm, what did that little flourish *really* mean once filtered through pilot-speak? Was doom imminent? The captain’s voice had a ‘be wary, but not too wary,’ quality. The young man double checked his seatbelt and began reviewing some of his dodgier life choices... Just listen to that inner voice; he reminded himself, the one telling you that this is the safest form of transport known to man. There was still a grain of comfort in that. And besides, it all made sense on the ground – nice, clinical, and antiseptic.

But that kind of level-headed rationality is the first casualty when you’re seven and a half miles above the earth, sling shotting along at 500 knots, hunkered down in the belly of the beast... Go slow, sip your drink, and take it easy. Keep this up, and you’ll give yourself an aneurysm. Debatable if they kept a proper crash cart stowed up front, even for their special guests. Equally terrifying was the prospect of his gunny sergeant bartender straddling him with some pocket defibrillator shouting, “Clear!” No, deep breaths, more vodka, get a *grip* man, work through it.

He scrolled through the movie list one more time, trying to ignore the unholy terror outside the cabin, but no sooner had the seat belt light clicked off when another heavier jolt kicked in, causing that great sickening *here we go* sensation. The young man grabbed both sides of the armrest and dug in. While this private terror played out, the autopilot slowly banked to the right and descended before leveling out. Across the aisle, a portly Brahmin banker-type grunted something through a drunken sleepy haze of Valium and used Guinness stank before rolling over.

After the worst subsided, Liam relaxed his vice-like grip on the armrests and reached into his pocket for another piece of Nicorette. He fumbled with the silver packaging while stealing a quick glance to see if anyone was witnessing his descent into goblin mode. His eyes drifted around the cabin. The coast was clear.

... Goddamn, this bunch was even further down in the hole than he was. But were they just drifting through a night of innocent sleep, he wondered, or were they like

himself, low-rent drugstore cowboys lost in the throes of some hyper-medicated state? No matter, nothing was stirring; the boy was riding solo on his own late-night perils. The big seats afforded the chance to get comfy, and many of his fellow travelers seized the opportunity to let it all hang out. One lady, not content with the reclinable bed, somehow had a foot hanging out in the aisle. Liam shook his head – *greedy*.

And yet, here he was, stuck among them... Didn't John the Baptist bust some ecclesiastical craziness about a certain number of years you will twist in Purgatory before receiving the Eternal Reward? Yes, Liam seemed to recall the Jesuit Brothers beating something like that into him once or twice in parochial school. But did those squired hucksters ever consider that this overfed pileup of vanilla might be the crowd they would have to spend it with? He knew trusting those loons was a bad idea.

The cold ocean air gave the big jet another sharp kick, and there was a low, rumbling sound as they lurched quickly to the left. Like some atmospheric prizefight playing out in the thin air, the pilots corrected with a firmer slide back to the right... This was nearing the critical mass, the moment one seriously considers the anatomical feasibility of crushing the Xanax into a fine orange powder, mixing in some Stoli, and mainlining the whole filthy bit into the nearest vein with a penknife and the swizzle stick from your drink... Surely the crew would tire of his babbling odd man act. At some point, out would come the duct tape and zip ties. They would calf rope him in one of the galleys and then take turns posting Tik Tok clips of his sad situation.

He was certain any aberrant behavior would nix his chances for a fair shake, if not the occasional future upgrade. Moreover, he couldn't handle any heavy legal scenes in foreign lands. The man from the embassy would take one look at his wild-eyed, disheveled state, disavow him completely, and recommend throwing him under the nearest train. If he was lucky, it would only be a few months in some minimum security daycare, but judging by the O'Shea karmic receivership, it was more likely adventures in anal banking in some hellish Celtic *Pappion*.

With the walls of his Alamo crumbling, he sank in his seat, resigned to ride it out with his only friend – the cheeky icon of an airplane, frozen somewhere over a big-empty, mocking him with glee. A twenty-nine year old man drooling Nicorette and sweating vodka, the erudite picture of an intrepid man of means.

## VII.

### Scarlet Begonias

Liam glanced at the young lady stretched out in the seat next to him. He watched her body rise and fall beneath the blanket, holding steady in a calm, peaceful rhythm. He peered in a bit closer... Maybe he should just leave her be. It would be the gracious and magnanimous thing to do. But then again, she was an excellent source of entertainment. Perhaps he should just give her a bit of a nudge, more of a love tap, really.

But the young man wised up and kept his hands to himself. She had already done a man-sized job, diplomatically playing along with the JFK bar crawl and the sudden jumpy glitch in the normally reserved Liam. She also quite possibly helped avert an international incident by grabbing his Nicorette from the bar as he wandered off looking for new plunder. That being said, he'd like to thank her, but he would just as soon bury the last few hours.

However, even a loyal wingman isn't going to work miracles when you're twitching in your seat like a nine-year old crashing off a sugar rush. The seatbelt light was on, but this seemed as good a time as any to go for a stroll. He briefly mulled this over as he usually kept his movements about the cabin to the minimum, lest his 183-pound bag of bones throw off the inner workings of their hundred-million-dollar piece of finely tuned machinery. Liam checked one more time to see if she was awake... Out like a light. He undid his seatbelt and passed through the curtain, making his way to the bathrooms at the rear of the sleeping plane.

Liam slid the door shut and waited for the lights to flicker on. He had a quick look around... No luck; his deranged plan of two drinks ago to jimmy loose the smoke detector and feed his beast would have never sailed. Just another invitation to be led off the plane

in shackles and into the waiting arms of some punch-happy Gaelic law organization.

“Well, that’s a shame,” he muttered.

He spat out the nicotine gum, his tongue now permanently tattooed with a spearmint chemical patina. He washed his hands and had a look in the mirror... Always interesting to study yourself in the middle of some ordeal, if just to see how you were holding up. All illusions to grace under pressure can take quite the beating once the shooting starts. The frowning fellow in the mirror seemed to agree. It was time to evaluate things. After taking a few deep breaths, he felt a sudden sense of calm standing alone at the back of the plane, and despite the tight confines, he was momentarily clear-headed and at ease.

Twenty-nine years, ten months, and eleven days. Seven more weeks, and he would be fouled up properly with the stench of thirty. And though his boyish face had filled in years ago and slight signs of gray had recently appeared around the temples, his eyes remained resilient and youthful. Even through the red-rimmed haze of no sleep and too much late-night fun, they were bright and alert.

He peered in close at the hazel color, mixed with bits of amber and dark green, and smiled for a second. They were his mother’s eyes, warm and disarming, with maybe just a dash of Hank’s vampire intensity to wildcard up the mix. His father’s looks otherwise dominated the show. The O’Shea boys shared the same fair skin, dark black hair, and slightly hawkish family-brand nose.

Liam’s close-cropped hair had grown out a bit, now sporting a head of slightly curly locks, long enough to tuck behind his ears but still many months away from a long-hair crossroads debate. He studied the gray again around his temples, his expression capturing that proper young person’s sense of horror when they occasionally notice that time is gunning for them too... Either way, it was a decent enough face, boyish cuteness devolving into respectable manhood. Liam figured he could live with that.

He adjusted the strap on his watch, snugly refitting the band, and had a final glance in the mirror. He leaned in closer for a more honest appraisal. In the smallest way, he could be satisfied with how he had kept *it* together. No, maybe not this future PTSD flashback of a flight, but rather, keeping it all together through the chaos of the last nine months.

Indeed, an epic bit of lunacy had already gone down since that fateful afternoon in Quinn’s office. A few personal self-discoveries here, a couple of needlessly reckless new hobbies there, and a recent law school ‘leave of absence’ just about rounded out the

highlight reel. But that was some grim intrigue for another day – he had enough on his psychic plate for the next seventy-three minutes... Liam rolled his head back and forth and rubbed the St. Christopher medal around his neck. A long-lost and recently found keepsake from an easier time, and who knows, maybe even some fortuity, because hell, even the occasional heretic needs a friend.

He could hear the muffled voice of the pilot over the intercom. Better get back or miss some lifesaving instruction. He snapped to it, ran some cold water through his hair, and rubbed his eyes... All right then, gather what's left of you and man up – seventy-two minutes to go.

... As he walked down the aisle, the first rays of sunlight began filtering through the windows. All the sleeping faces were slowly coming back to life, awakening, or perhaps recovering from similar extracurricular activities.

Liam braved a glance out a window, peering down into the last bits of darkness. There was something very surreal about all the well-fed tourists zipping along in high style over the icy waters below, tracing the ancient paths of the famine ships that once carried, among others, the raggedy ass O'Shea brood to America... There was also something fairly unique in the Irish diaspora; a kind of permanent longing for home that seemed to amplify with the generations rather than fade away in content, roly-poly Americanness.

By and large, everyone on this existential tragedy-waiting-to-happen was some manner of the original strain. They were either the pure breed of homegrown Irish or the mongrel variations of the American cousin – embodied by just the likes of Liam O'Shea.

The young man had already made this trip across the ocean several times before. In fact, it was a fairly regular event, as Keira O'Shea's roots still ran deep in her parents' homeland, and many of her maiden 'Mulaney' lineage still called the Dublin area home. Liam had spent many summers as their guest, while his mother played host for most of the rest, with aunts, uncles, and cousins of various degrees always in the mix.

He wondered how many trips this would make. Eleven, maybe twelve? He could whinge about his current predicament, but he couldn't say his nerves were suddenly rattled from a lack of familiarity... Liam glanced around at the sleeping faces. The real-deal Irish were always easier to spot – they seemed to enjoy a sounder sleep, a sleep that ignored the roll and pitch of the plane, and the various phobias that laid weaker sorts low.

It was a sleep that spoke to a millennium of particularly dodgy luck. Because after



bloodthirsty Vikings, pillaging Edwardians, Cromwellian headhunters roaming the countryside, engineered famines, foreign occupation, partition, and sectarian strife—well, then, what was air travel except a joy-laden piece of fluff delivered on a silk bed by a retinue of supermodels.

Most likely, some of these bog-jumpers were returning from extended stays—undeclared, of course—on those joyless three-month travel visas. No doubt they'd found safe shelter up and down the East Coast, tucked into the fraternal arms of some Masonic bartending order. A sort of non-monstrous *Boys from Brazil* lifeline for the young Irish Wildgoose, who can't stay put in his own country.

This beast is noted for an overworked mojo, questionable fashion sense, and keen desire to rove and wander about. But even the basest of them could usually transform into some wizardly Henry Higgins, smooth-talking linguist, if they thought it might help reel in that special lady. These were some of the cretins he was heading back to see, and these were the people he thought his closest family.

And as life back in a Brooklyn basement wasn't quite inspiring the soul, why not try his second home? An invitation to a cousin's wedding, one of the main Mulaney brood, was the proverbial sign that sealed the deal. He loaded up on practical luggage and found someone to mind Hank's house. All was well, all roads led home, and to this moment, seven and a half miles in the sky, zipping along at near bullet speed, trying to remember where he left his vacation face.

Liam made his way to the front, where he found the young lady just as he had left her. Despite the continuous rattling around the sky, she had barely moved... He shook his head. Good lord, this one could sleep in a cement mixer spinning doughnuts through a hurricane. He felt a tinge of guilt, but it was time for a wakeup call. Leaning over for a better look out the window, he gave her an accidental nudge.

"Good morning there," he smiled.

The young lady looked around, her light blue eyes readjusting to the world. "... Hey, what's with the elbows?"

"My apologies. That was the plane. We've been moderately chopping around for a while now."

"What time is it?"

"Midnight back home and five a.m. in Dublin."

She rooted around her bag, looking for her glasses. "When do we land?"

He glanced at the monitor. "... Sixty-two minutes if this little bastard can be trusted."

She stretched out, shaking off the last bits of sleep. "How long was I out?"

"Two, maybe three hours."

"Did you sleep?" She asked.

"What do you think?"

She smiled. "I think you've kept yourself in the full upright position and white-knuckled that seat for the last three hours... Am I getting warm?"

He ignored her abuse.

She pinched his side. "Was it one of those karma debates, or did you go straight for the existential dread?"

"Neither; I went with a good old fashioned crashing vibe."

He rolled the ice in his glass. "While *you* were in the greedy throes of sleep, I was awake, on watch, on point, if you will."

"Doing what?"

"Having your standard conversations with the Almighty, promising to better my life if he just gets this chimeric abomination back on the ground. All of which seems to have ensured our safe passage... You're welcome."

"Well, aren't you just a little bundle of disorder this morning? Did you remember to pledge your life to charity? That's a biggie. Forget that one and you might as well cash your check."

"Laugh, laugh—have your fun."

"Thank you anyway, though." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Keeping us safe as always."

With each passing moment, the young lady grew more alert just as Liam was starting to fade, his body nearing the toasty, misfired end of a thirty-three-hour day. A few rows back, he could hear the reassuring sounds of a baby crying, and all around him, voices were rising and falling. His Irish drink-link was taking beverage orders. He wondered if they could start with a Bloody Mary, as this was a fairly respectable early a.m. drink... No, daylight was here, and she no longer looked in the mood to nurse his

oddball act. She was back in alpha enforcer mode and would be until the wheels hit the runway.

Her colleague was a few rows ahead, laying out the makings for a traditional Irish breakfast: fried eggs, sausage, bacon, tomatoes, toast, and the nebulous black discs his ancestors called *pudding*. Liam had been holding out for some of these stomach-coating staples of Celtic comfort food. They were always the best counterpoint to a late night spent rigorously terrorizing yourself.

Unfortunately, his hungry thoughts were interrupted by another observation from the lady in 13B. “What you *really* should have done was taken a few of those ‘relaxation’ gummies before we left Brooklyn.”

He felt a little lightheaded, but the words came easy. “Sativa highs and claustrophobia *do not* mix well. Besides, it would have just confused the amazing amount of alcohol, Xanax, and nicotine already careening around my system... Another thirty minutes and I might have turned into that goddamn creature on the wing in *Twilight Zone*.”

“The what?”

Liam slumped low in his seat like a man with no more cards to play. “I ate most of that useless gum,” he said sadly. “Did nothing but crank me higher. Now I’ve got enough of that evil business juicing my veins that my watch keeps asking if it should call emergency services.”

“Well, give airplane mode a try. Listen, go easy with the Nicorette; they aren’t Tic Tacs. Besides, I said take a couple of gummies, not a bottle of Percocet.”

He smiled. “I usually make it a point to just say no to life’s temptations.”

She was thumbing through a copy of *The Atlantic* and munching on a granola bar. “Anyway, it’s good to see you’re dealing with your fears like a sane, rational man.”

“Whoa, walk that back a little, my friend... This isn’t about fear.”

She chuckled. “What is it then, a lifestyle choice?”

“I would call it practicality born out of necessity.”

He studied their sardine-tight conditions for a moment, the slight swaying of the cabin, and the dull roar of the engines. “Seriously, you’ve got to admit, this is the definition of unnatural – we weren’t meant for *this*.”

She said nothing, now quite engrossed in her magazine and some heavy article about sleeper anarchists in the French government. He could sense he'd lost her. Adding insult to injury, the nimble crew was suddenly slow getting the coffee flowing.

A pause of invitation hung in the air.

"You know," he said, "I was just thinking how I genuinely enjoyed flying back when I was a kid... I'd get on the plane with a Discman, my Game Boy, and some comic books, and I was good to go... None of this nonsense."

She peeked over her magazine. "What happened?"

Liam let out a low breath. "*I have no idea.*"

She grew quiet for a moment, thinking carefully about her next words. "Listen, flying used to bother me too. Actually, for a few years, I was terrified to fly. I would dig my nails into the seat and break out in a cold sweat every time the plane *did* something. It was pretty terrible."

"Yeah? What brought you around?"

"I was on a bad flight once to Chicago back in college. I mean—like, scary bad. It was nighttime, and we were already flying through some weather when one of the engines stopped working. The plane started vibrating and making all sorts of weird noises. I could hear people starting to lose it—crying, shouting, frantically sending texts to loved ones. For a few minutes there, it felt pretty dicey, not knowing what was going to happen next."

She shook her head. "And by now, I'm beginning to lose it myself. But I started watching one of the flight attendants and noticed how calm she stayed throughout the whole thing. Don't get me wrong; she didn't look too thrilled to be there, but she also didn't seem scared. And then I realized the rest of the crew was acting just as calmly, like the whole thing was just a particularly long day at the office... Anyway, we made an emergency landing; no one was hurt, and they put all the brave ones back on the next flight. In fact, there was a little story in the news about it the next day. Apparently, we were never in any real danger, and they landed out of an abundance of caution."

Liam listened intently. "Did you get back on the plane?"

"I did," she said with a little pride. "I'm not sure what changed, but just watching the crew and that level of confidence made an impression on me that's stayed ever since. So, now, as long as the flight attendants look calm, I can weather most anything."

He chuckled, already a black cloud on her story. "And if they look rattled?"

She squeezed his hand. "Well then, you can break out those rosaries and go to town."

She mulled it over for a moment. "I think part of it was just accepting that there were going to be things in life I couldn't control or influence, and I could either make myself miserable worrying about it or just live my life and feel confident that it's going to be ok... You know, you give yourself that kind of leeway, and you might discover an unexpected sense of freedom. Stick with it, and who knows, you might even start to *believe* it."

The hairs on his arm jumped. This was starting to sound unnervingly New Agey and feel-good. "And that's all it took to get you in the game?"

She set her magazine on the tray. "You mean besides the century of engineering and the unbelievable odds in your favor?" She leaned over. "Think about it; the flying is the easiest part. There's no effort to any of this—no fighting your way through some airport, no cursing under your breath about sixty-dollar checked bag fees, or the strip search at Security. Here you just lay back, close your eyes, and a few hours later you wake up someplace new."

His seat partner seemed invigorated. "Maybe *that's* the way you should be looking at it. Where else can you show up, do nothing, have a few drinks, take a nap, and sixteen hours later be on the other side of the planet?" She shook him on the knee. "You're a *lucky* fellow to be alive at such a time. You've got to accentuate the positives, my friend."

A shudder ran through the young man. The thought of sixteen hours in a plane gave him the fidgets. He already estimated his threshold for these aerial leaps of faith at nine or ten hours. Anything after that and his behavior would become erratic and scattershot; the perfect fodder for a Mace tossing flight attendant.

... She sensed his mind was still spinning in circles. "Think about that ride to the airport, Liam. The BQE to the LIE to the Van Wyck, rush hour through Brooklyn and Queens—that was by far the most dangerous thing you did today... *This is safe.*"

She had a point. The luck of the draw had gifted them a limo driver who seemed locked in a preternatural struggle with his own inner demons, as he juggled three different shouting matches on his Bluetooth. "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

The young lady straightened up. "This is all a bit fascinating. My guy, the pragmatic voice of reason, has quite the irrational fear of flying... I think we found your

kryptonite.”

“It’s not the flying I take issue with; I’m strictly a crash and burn guy over here. I like to think of it as the concern for unannounced reunions with the ground.”

She sighed. “Let’s call it the fear of long shots. Listen, I’m probably the closest you’ll ever come to someone with a genuinely scary plane story, and it turned out to be nothing – the air travel version of a flat tire... Worrying about this plane crashing is the bizarro flip side of believing you’re going to win the lottery someday. Neither thing is going to happen.”

Any mention of lotteries and cheating long odds wasn’t exactly comforting, but he politely nodded. “Maybe we’ll just chalk things up to me being a sleep-deprived, non compos mentis, loon?”

“There’s my little ray of light coming around.”

He thought about it for a moment though, still trying to win a convert to his elevated reasoning. “*Jesus*, doesn’t it bother you that you can’t see out of the front of this thing?” He pointed down the aisle. “And for that matter, what about the two complete strangers up there with our fates in their completely anonymous hands?”

He had a wild, twitchy look in his eye. “Am I right? Hell, they could be dope-snorting, wife-swapping, glue huffing...little boyeurists for all we know, but right now they’re calling all the shots.” A grim resignation replaced the fire in his eyes.

The young lady listened thoughtfully. “... Well, I don’t think too many glue huffers get past the background check these days, and the wife-swapping market is really more of a media myth than anything. But look at it this way – can you fly a plane?”

“No.”

“Then why do you need to see out of the front of one?”

He chuckled. “Can’t argue with that. Next, you’ll be telling me there are no monsters under the bed.”

“No, they’re there – and they mostly eat silly Irishmen. Mostly.”

Her glass half full take on their situation would usually have triggered a host of colorful suggestions, but on such a brittle morning, a little optimism was the right medicine. “Hey, thank you for being the even-keeled one. I have some eccentricities if you haven’t noticed.”

“Well, I try my best... Listen, Chuck Yeager, you keep it locked down up here – I’ve got to pee.” Rising with a graceful stretch, she started for the aisle. “Be a good man and order me a muffin when they come back.”

He stood to let her pass. “No problem. I got a little single-serving friend thing going on with the head lady.”

“I’m sure you do.” She pressed her body close by his and gave his ribs a tickle. “Almost there, Baby Huey.”

As the young lady made her way down the aisle, Liam stopped for a moment and marveled in her presence. Ms. Emma Connelly, his chirpy travel companion, closest confidant, and steadfast anchor in his recently reshuffled life, had a way of drawing attention without even trying.

At just about five foot nine, she stood tall with a lithe, athletic build that exuded both energy and grace. Her posture was relaxed yet confident, the kind of ease that comes from being truly comfortable in your own skin. She balanced a friendly demeanor with a laid-back, ‘no worries’ attitude – and most refreshingly, a genuine lack of ego. And while an undeniably pretty girl, with piercing slate blue eyes and soft, delicate features, there was a witty, self-deprecating charm to her that made Emma instantly approachable. As she struck up a conversation with another woman in line, her voice rose slightly above the ambient hum of the cabin, the sound of it pleasant to his ears. Liam smiled to himself as Emma tucked a strand of sandy blond hair into a neat ponytail, all the while fully focused on her new friend, her attention unbroken and present.

... This charming and approachable business was all a bit of an abstraction for the likes of Liam. He wondered whether you could learn that kind of kumbaya, or whether it had to come from some mystical and innate source. Either way, it was a curious sight to see, especially for an O’Shea, who as a family generally turned into a gang of crazed, rage-filled hippos at even the slightest bit of perceived incivility.

As his godfather Fintan liked to say, ‘Good manners cost nothing, but they’ll buy you just about everything.’ But then again, Fintan was a man who also offered wisdoms like, ‘Being sober will always put you at a disadvantage in a street fight.’ As with most of the rare insights in his family, it was pretty much a ‘do you feel lucky’ coin toss.

No matter, with Fintan safely in his Dublin bed down below, and his diplomatic voice of reason happily working the galley area, Liam laid back and tried to find that one elusive piece of comfort which had escaped him so far. He could feel the engines revving down, their drone growing softer as they began losing some altitude. A general buzz of

commotion swirled all around him – with others coming to as the last one went under. He laid his head to the side and leaned back. He could always find some food at the airport.



## VIII.

### Ca Plane Pour Moi

Wheels hitting the ground jolted him out of his sleep like a cattle prod tossed in a bathtub. The jet thundered down the runway as the reverse thrusters kicked in and the powerful roar of the engines melted to a gentle whirling hum... And then there were the sounds of many people clapping and cheering. Ah, yes, he'd forgotten about the charming local custom. Even in his burnt and sleepy state he managed to join the growing chorus.

The majestic green and white Boeing with a Claddagh ring on its tail lumbered slowly toward the gate. Out the window a ghostly fog surrounded them. He squinted, just barely able to make out the form of another airplane across the apron.

"We'd been circling for nearly an hour," she added over his shoulder. "The fog was too heavy to land; we were almost *diverted*...thought maybe it was better to just let you sleep."

He blinked the grog from his eyes and offered a fist bump. "Probably for the best."

They reached the gate and 267 seatbelts popped off in near unison. The young couple gathered up everything in their seats, as Aer Cladhair flight 1946, June 10<sup>th</sup>, was now safely in the books. Liam straightened out his clothes and reached into the overhead. He'd gone mental health day casual for the flight – dark jeans, gray t-shirt, old motorcycle boots, and a shiny chronograph watch. His three days of wispy beard rounded out a relaxed scruffiness, and the sudden prospect of escape gave him a shot of adrenaline. He grabbed a dark summer coat from the bin and checked for his passport and phone. The contents of his pockets revealed various mashed packets of Nicorette, cigarettes, and one wallet containing three credit cards, a New York driver's license, two expired MetroCards, and \$21 in cash.

Emma opted for the relaxed vibes of her West Coast ancestors, sporting faded

jeans and a light blue sweater that brought out the color in her eyes. With no jewelry or makeup and her sandy blond hair pulled back in a simple ponytail, she looked the picture of well-rested health.

They moved toward the door for a farewell from the assembled crew... And there she was again, the stern-eyed master of the house who played such an integral part in last night's mischief, seeing him off on his aviation walk of shame. He flashed her a little smile and a wink, and then fixed an appraising scowl on the pilots—a long hard stare at these two Juggalos who had been playing the would-be deity card for the last eight hours.

Was there any obvious trace of untoward depravity about them? Flecks of white powder around the nose, red-rimmed Visine eyes, any nervous uncontrollable grinding of the teeth? It didn't seem like it but looks can be deceiving. Behind every company man in a pressed uniform lurked the potential for some freakish creature, ever ready to take a walk on the wild side if cut loose.

... Yeah, that's right, Caligula, Liam nodded. Keep smiling at the rubes, but some people knew better. And the good money said it was a bestial fur-gripping free-for-all behind closed doors, just like it usually is with the straight ones... But that was just one man's biased opinion.

"Good to see you. Come back soon." The captain smiled.

"... How do you live with yourself, you chipper hophead?" Was what the young man heard in his head, but the words sounded closer to, "Thanks, you too."

And with that they deplaned.

Dublin Airport is nice, modern and very small. A short walk later and they were standing in line at the immigrations check. As they were the first international arrival of the morning, things moved along at a smooth clip. Before long, Liam was presenting his *Irish* passport to the man for the stamping and appraisal process... If you were diligent with the mountain of paperwork, like one shell-shocked aviophobe, dual citizenship was one of the strange quirks of having a grandmother born out in the hills of County Sligo.

But the Immigration man barely raised an eye, even with the young man's slightly placeable New York accent. As long as you weren't jumping the fence from some rusting Soviet satellite state, looking for the nine-lives spent Celtic Tiger, they were just as soon inclined to stamp the page and turn you loose to spend some dough.

Another short walk brought them to the luggage carousel, where their bags quickly came down the chute: numbers three, six, and nine. A little bit of luck was in the

air for sure. Liam bought a fresh pack of cigarettes, some strong coffee, and they hoofed it for the bus out to the car rental stands.

The shuttle slowly rumbled away from the terminal. The fog had burned off and the first morning light painted the sky in shades of pink and blue. As they circled the airport, Emma studied her unfamiliar surroundings. The view was a patchwork of contrasts: a blend of Ireland's raw beauty mixed with the unpolished grittiness of a working-class neighborhood. They passed several low, brick buildings, their dull facades brightened by the morning light, and rows of small square houses laid out in tight, uniform lines.

The landscape was dotted with patches of green—small pastures and hedgerows holding their ground amid the urban sprawl. Liam smiled, tasting the faint salt in the damp air, a reminder that the sea was just a few miles away. The horizon was interrupted by the sight of towering cranes and industrial structures, a stark reminder that Dublin's heartbeat pulsed as much in the warehouses and shops of the northside as it did in the charming tourist streets of the south.

They stepped off on the far side of the airport property. In the distance, a steady stream of jets was lining up with the runway, as the rush hour kicked into high gear. Liam walked into 'Smiling' Leo O'Bannon's rental stand, a one-off operation just beyond the more respectable, yet overbooked, places. He slipped into line and studied the distressed young man behind the desk.

Emma waited outside with the baggage and the fresh air. It was early June but still cold enough to see your breath in the morning. She sifted through her bag until she found a heavier wool sweater. From inside the building, she could hear the faint strains of what might have been raised voices—perhaps even Liam's in the mix? No worries, he was a big boy, probably just making friends.

She settled against the guardrail, taking in the view—very green, very pretty, and very cold. So far, reality matched the myth. Emma tugged her sleeves over chilled fingers, pulling her turtleneck to her chin. Despite the bite in the air, she was happy to see her breath misting in the cool morning light. Quite the game changer from the equatorial steam bath they'd fled the night before.

She thumbed through her phone as the sound of bad vibrations grew from within the rental shop. She ignored the hubbub and sent a quick text to her sister back in California. Emma was a law school classmate of Liam's, though she had actually finished the task at hand, graduating near the top of their class. In addition to her sharp legal

mind, she'd earned a master's degree in public administration. This little getaway was, among other things, Liam's idea of a well-deserved graduation present. "C'mon," he'd said. "We'll get out of town, mix it up, have a few laughs."

Foregoing her parents' more traditional expectations, Emma was soon heading into the tense instability of Nigeria, where she would put her new skills to work. By the end of the summer, she'd join an ongoing World Bank program in the capital, Lagos. Her role would involve assisting a new administration with rebuilding government departments from the ground up. Not quite an MCU-style adventure, but after spending an undergrad year abroad in Cameroon, Emma had fallen in love with West Africa. The chance to live there for two years and contribute something positive was a dream she couldn't pass up.

"Hmm...I don't know about this." Liam groused when he heard the plan. He remembered tossing around words like 'war zone' and 'recent Ebola outbreaks' quite a bit. But she had a stubborn streak that belied her easygoing nature and wouldn't be deterred. That is to say, she was a cranked-up do-gooder.

Moments later, Liam reappeared, rubbing his hands together with a devilish look in his eyes. He lit up a cigarette, the smoke curling around him like a veil.

"What happened to you?"

Liam shook his head. "Poor Leo, he ain't smiling this morning. But it was nothing a little horse wrangling and bad noise couldn't work out."

The cold air felt good and his triple espresso was slowly bringing things back into focus. "Well, they tried sandbagging us—my fair weather friends. They'd just as soon have us walking into town." He took a drag, admiring a big 787 touching down.

"Anyway, their reservation system called it a day. It's pretty hopelessly fucked in there... The poor guy behind the counter is in siege mode, lots of irate tourists storming off with menacing talk of retribution, and a world class torching on TripAdvisor. Such are the perils of running an independent operation, I guess. An angry mob storming away to his competitors, but I went a different route..."

She smiled, a little intrigued. "So, you were able to sort things out?"

"Yep."

"Did he offer you something else, big guy, or did you have to get rough with him?"

"I talked myself into something else."

“What, like a full size?”

Liam shrugged. “Meh.”

Within moments a strong revving growled from down the fairground way, startling some cows in a nearby field. And around the corner pulled a sleek black BMW M8 Roadster—straight from the factory floor in Bavaria...A rather elegant piece of machinery, and decidedly not one of those Easy Bake Oven Z4 models. This was the new one, with the sleek lines and the monster engine which would turn the heads and scatter the wildlife.

Liam looked over. “Here it comes.”

A grin spread across his face as he admired the oncoming Beamer, not so much for the both wings flapping peacock strut to it. Rather, he wore that smile for something that spoke to the complete and utter inappropriateness of the gesture. It was though his better senses had momentarily come loose from their moorings, and instead of steadying them, he stood at the edge of the pier and waved bye-bye as they sailed past.

Maybe the weird glint in his eye told the tale— one where late nights of drunken, drug-altered introspection had made for the worst of bedfellows— particularly when you felt your life was on the line. Now, back on mother earth with the unpleasantness behind him, and only the residual boozy-nicotine comedown ahead, he could afford to feel a little elevated.

Out of his depth suddenly seemed like the place to be. And now they had the proper getaway car to continue this mishmash of a theme. Because, despite his brain-fried state and advanced state of sketchiness, he was certain *something* interesting lay just around the corner.

The low-slung car pulled up to the curb. An older man than the excitable fellow behind the counter hopped out and started inspecting the car for dings and scratches. He had the strong ‘I no longer care’ perfume of unfiltered Chesterfields and nursed a raspy cough that gave Liam a momentary fright of Christmas future. But the boy was determined, and nothing was harshing his buzz. After a quick once over, he thanked the man and took the keys.

“Liam James.” Emma’s lips curled into a smile. “Chauffeured rides to the airport, First Class seats, exotic sports cars. Were you about to get down on one knee or something?”

He chuckled, “Easy there, those seats were business class. Besides, I’m a bit trashy.

Think more along the lines of the Little Elvis Chapel on Paradise Boulevard.”

“Good to know. But seriously – have you finally lost your marbles?”

“Ouch.” He looked up from the sleek profile of the car.

“C’mon, I played along with the limo to the airport and the ‘waitlist lottery’ upgrades, but this is getting a little out of hand, don’t you think?”

“Well, that’s one way to put it.”

“... Jesus, look at this thing. It must have cost a fortune.”

“It wasn’t cheap.”

“Liam, I can’t split this with you.”

“Split? We’re rolling like the Germans here, my lovely, not the Dutch. Besides, I’m not paying for this...you know who is.”

Oh, goodness. Here we go again – the Voldemort ruse. Emma hopped off the curb and walked toward him. “Is this really the smartest play? What about all those conversations about being cautious with your money and taking things slow?”

“Yes, well, what can I say... Things are a bit fluid this morning.”

“Are they now?”

“Yeah, that or just some shotgunned minor breakdown; I’m not sure yet... But I think that fellow who had his knickers in a permanent twist might’ve expired somewhere over the ocean.” He made the sign of the cross. “Rest in peace, bozo.”

“Had a bit of an epiphany, did we?”

“No, no, more of a revelation, I’d say. But that got me to thinking, which got me to rearranging. And in the swirl of reorganizing things, a jet black convertible with a leather drop top, quadraphonic Blaupunkt, and 4.4 liter V-8 turbo engine with more horses than Argentina, suddenly felt like a priority.”

... She was pretty sure he had seized the wrong day, but she let him make his case. “I even got the bigger engine,” he rubbed his hands together. “So we wouldn’t be shown up out on the street.” He gestured back to the bunkhouse. “These guys merely facilitated the reality of my late-night chaw session – therefore you can see the whole thing was a bit preordained... So how about you jump in before I come to my senses and buy us two bus passes?”

“So, what you’re saying is that you need a BMW for some kind of equilibrium?”

“C’mon now,” Liam smiled, “this car isn’t just some cliché ego accessory... I mean, *it is*, but do I look like some bougie, new money jackoff to you?” He gently tapped the hood. “We’re going to *need* this, before this thing is over.”

He rallied a bit of gravitas. “You see, out past those gates lies a whole world beyond our grasp. Narrow, rain-slicked roads, chocked full of wandering livestock and, worse, bands of deranged hooligan youth doing their best Lewis Hamilton impersonations between lager-flavored bouts of The Big Spit.”

“Who the hell is Lewis –”

Liam cut her off. “So, we’ll be needing a proper machine with the emergency acceleration and tight handling for all those last-second sheep dodging drifts.”

... She couldn’t tell if he was on too many drugs or not enough, but his conviction was impressive. “You’re a big boy,” she sighed. “It’s your money.”

He grew serious for a moment. “No, it’s really not – and therein lies the potential for a little bit of fun.”

“... I don’t know.”

“Look, you’re not splitting anything with me. I’ve more or less kidnapped you into this thing – am I right?”

“Gee, Liam, that’s a romantic way of putting it.”

“Exactly. So c’mon, pretty lady, hop in and let me whisk you away in this freaky machine with six speakers in the trunk. We should do this thing *right*.”

“Ok, ok – you are persuasive as ever.”

She came around to the far side of the car where Liam was already holding open the door. “Just so we’re on the up and up – you don’t really believe I buy any of this, do you?”

“It’s bullshit that makes for a red rose, my dear... And, if we’re being honest, this thing’s already making my dink feel bigger.”

She climbed in. “You’re a sick twist, my friend.”

“Sick? Maybe.” He closed the door. “But you can’t say I don’t have a trick or two.”

The agitated young fellow came to see them off. He handed Liam his paperwork

and shot a nervous glance at the Roadster. It wasn't every day that he received three death threats before morning tea, when in walks some crusty American with bloodshot eyes but a polite enough disposition. Who, when all talk of practical alternatives fails, stares off in the distance for a moment, produces an Amex Gold and tells you to let it loose, and add 20% to the effort for your not so pleasant morning... Do you call the Garda, or do you humor this loon? No brainer there, he swiped the card.

And so it goes. "My uncle runs a dealership in Ballymun. He'll lease it to you on a temporary basis... It's not entirely legal, but it's not entirely illegal."

"Works for me." His new friend nodded.

... Well, the American looked normal enough now and all the credit checks went through. "Ah, it's lovely, isn't it, Mr. O'Shea. You need directions, you know where you're going?"

"Yep, downtown. But I thought I'd take her around the loop for a while, open it up, get my head straight." Liam could sense the man's apprehension. "Don't worry, we're trustworthy people."

The last of the O'Sheas could feel the next reserve of adrenaline kicking in. He walked over to the wrong side of his ninety thousand dollar emergency third-party lease consignment.

"Where's the wheel?"

"Other side, honey." Emma piped up.

"... You don't say?"

He gave the rental man a sheepish look and moved to the driver's side. "Don't worry, we're respectable people."

He started the car, eased into first, revved it gently, and headed out past the toll island toward the open road.

"You ready for some weirdness?"

She smiled. "Let's find out."



To Be Continued in Book Two, *Dirty Old Town*