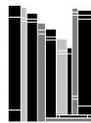


EAMONN LENIHAN

Drowning The Shamrock



a nobetterman book

For: Saoirse, Terence, Katie, Clodagh & Sophie...
Growing up in a Republic...

"Drowning The Shamrock" -

Preview edition only.

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*Quotation used from James Stephen's "The Insurrection In Dublin",
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*"Munchausen Mick" first appeared, in slightly different form, in "Comma, Vol.1 No.2",
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Preface

... The story goes that about twelve o'clock on Monday an English officer had marched into the Post Office and demanded two penny stamps from the amazed volunteers who were inside. He thought their uniforms were postal uniforms. They brought him in, and he is probably still trying to get a perspective on the occurrence. They had as prisoners in the Post Office a certain number of soldiers, and rumour had it these men accommodated themselves quickly to duress, and were busily engaged peeling potatoes for the meal which they would partake of later on with the Volunteers...

James Stephens "The Insurrection In Dublin" (1916)

**December 8th 1986 -
April 16th 1987**

01.

Head-the-Ball knows, from experience, that turning the communal radio down tended to provoke anger in colleagues. And yet he now dares to push his luck, twice nudges a knob that reduces the strains of a perennial Christmas favourite to a merely annoying murmur. His action prompts the floor to shout back *Hey!* in unison, a rare show of solidarity that does in fairness pressure him to turn the volume back up. Which he does, though only by a little.

Going back the way he came, Head-the-Ball loiters as usual near Dan and the facing table.

"...the size," he now hears Dan say, "of a very large cat. Up comes the dandy to the rusty five-bar gate where I'm standing anyway, the arse of my pants hanging out. I'd have been six, going on seven. The da is stood there with his arms folded across his chest. Our postman is leaning over his bicycle, taking it all in and in no hurry to move on to the next address..."

Head-the-Ball waits to be told *Private conversation here!* before completing the short journey back to his own sorting bench.

He'd thrown up his delivery from here, for the past three decades. Why no postman more senior to himself had not staked a claim on such a fabulous location remained a mystery. Adjacent to the stairs, his was, for sure, the closest bench to the Postmaster's office. But, whenever its door was left slightly ajar, Head-the-Ball could hear important conversations by simply leaning to his right, as if pointing to one on a clock face. And, by looking in through the clear, floor-to-ceiling window, he might also assess not just *what* was being said, but *how* it was said. Sometimes, Head-the-Ball was even able to appreciate those delicate matters chosen to be left *unsaid*.

Head-the-Ball's bench, once you took the trouble of turning the radio down a little, didn't just stand within earshot of Dan. A forty-five degree twist of the head allowed an unbroken view of the man's movements. In other words, from this corner position, the only sorter in the office could be monitored, by sight and sound, without him actually realising it.

Plenty going for it then, if – like Head-the-Ball – you believed that curiosity sustained survival.

Now, listening in at three – rather than one – o'clock, Head-the-Ball again considers those secondary elements that shed so much light on verbal communication: the nod and the wink, the crafty facial expression, the grand or subtle hand gesture and the seemingly innocent inflection on a specific word or syllable.

At this instant, Dan is carelessly slurping a mug of tea and eyeing a tabloid newspaper that's been opened out on the facing table in front of him. Head-the-Ball suspects the oddball won't be hunting through its pages for juicy gossip or wasting any time gawking at the female glamour on show: Dan is someone more likely to be interested in the runners and riders of the 3:15 at Haydock Park.

"Have your grand aspirations," Dan now says to the younger man at his side. "But don't be making a rod for your back."

Dan can well speak of grand aspirations: too proud to remain a lowly postman, he was never considered bright enough to be clerical material. The latest upstart to put his name forward for such a position has, for some reason – and just two weeks from Christmas Day – been knocked back to his old grade.

"I'm *not* ashamed of being a postman," English Jim insists. "It's just that I've a background in finance."

"Ah, yes, your time in the city of London. Of shag all use in this parish. Do you mind me asking – what, exactly, was it that brought you here? Love?"

"I used to think so, Dan."

"What, then?" Dan says, the bridge of his bi-focals balanced above two flaring nostrils.

"I guess I like the view."

"Séamus," (the lads weren't in the habit of calling him English Jim to his face), "you're a romantic fool. How is it you're not on the counter today?"

"The boss wants me to tip round the sorting office."

"Does he? And did His Lordship say why?"

"He doesn't want me to balance my cash-drawer so soon after yesterday evening."

"The scrooge'd begrudge you an extra hour?"

"Looks like it, Dan. Is that OK with you?"

With English Jim being off the counter, Caruso would of course be taking the slack up for the day. At twice the hourly rate of his standard pay...

"You realise you're cutting into my overtime?" Dan protests, a comfortable mat under his feet and a sturdy stool at his side.

"I'll try not to make a habit of it."

"No overtime, blocking everyone else's, little hope of being made permanent," Dan murmurs. "Small wonder none of the lads volunteered for your position."

"Mind if I put a tape on?"

English Jim's voice is as flat as his demeanour. Slouching on the edge of a borrowed stool, the young man already seems long past caring.

"I *do* mind," Dan says, staring over the frame of his bifocals. "The music you like drives me bananas. Now if you had a lively polka, or a lovely slow air – "

"The youth of today?" English Jim ventures.

"Growing up, we hadn't two ha'ppenies to rub together. But we were content."

"Your generation must have thrived on hardship and religion."

"And your own crowd is better? Worshipping Pagan Gods who prance round Croke Park with white smoke coming out of their backsides!" Dan softens, "You're all set for tomorrow?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"How much training did you get?"

"Just the two weeks, Dan."

"I remember when clerks got a full nine months, followed by another three on the counter with a mentor stood over their shoulder."

"Times have changed."

"For sure," Dan flatly agrees. "In my day, trainees were told to treat those who cashed pensions like a mother or father. Now, the boys up in Dublin jabber on about customer analytics and volume of sales. And, when we *got busy* getting busy, good manners were the first thing to go."

"That might explain the number of counter shortages."

What might accurately be described as a gleam in the eye now dominates Dan's visage.

"Did you not balance last night?"

"I was £7 down."

"Seven?" Dan reflects, mildly disappointed. "That's close enough."

"Easy for you to say. You'll not be putting in money from your own pocket."

"How does Caruso put it? *Most employers,*" Dan chuckles in the remembering, "*disperse staff bonuses at this joyful time of year.*"

"The man has a way with words."

"You do intend to do a bit this morning?"

"How can I help, Dan?"

"I've the incoming sort bang up to date. Why don't you," Dan says, stretching to reach a bundle in the sorting-bench to his right, "do these for me?"

"Fine," English Jim quickly decides.

The lad has no idea what he's letting himself in for.

Head-the-Ball pauses at the top of the stairs, outside the office that's right by the staff canteen. Normally, of a Thursday morning, Caruso would be inside, trying to balance the weekly cash account. Today, he was already downstairs, covering English Jim's counter absence. Leaning in towards the closed door, Head-the-Ball is pleased to (just about) detect The Hare blathering *A White Christmas, you say?* Followed by what sounds like: *Yerra, Tom, I'll get over to you, God willing...* And then: *God bless, God bless. Love to all in Chicago...*

Head-the-Ball knocks and enters.

"That van of mine needs another service," he says without breaking his stride.

As ever, the room is furnished with oak desk, three-band stereo radio-cassette, thermostatically-controlled fan-heater, electric kettle, plush leather chair and the telephone you could get an outside line on simply by dialing 7.

"No sign of the keys up here, Dan," The Hare says into the mouthpiece, quick as a flash. "I'll be down to you shortly."

He slams the phone down into its cradle in the manner of a drama queen. Evidently, The Hare doesn't mind cutting Tom in Chicago off before getting the windy city's long-range weather forecast.

"Sorry, I thought you were Caruso," Head-the-Ball lies.

"I'd say he's downstairs. I'd have not had to answer his phone otherwise."

"I suppose not," say Head-the-Ball. "With all this overtime, the man'll surely owe the new Postmaster a favour or two."

"That would be the plan."

The onset of December 25th was once more creating the same old issues for postal staff and lay people. Those most resourceful of parents had joined Christmas clubs and had long been putting the pennies away for toys, hampers and decorations. Head-the-Ball, a responsible father himself, was sure to be reminded that these sterling efforts again fell well short of their children's expectations. Kids knew what they wanted. They wanted the crap advertisers were at pains to offload during the winter teatime TV schedule.

Inside the staff canteen, Head-the-Ball notices that English Jim has begun dealing with the huge bundle Dan had provided him with. The downgraded clerk has also set down a box of reply envelopes embellished with cartoon reindeers. Head-the-Ball knows, from previous years, that the card inside contained a personal message of goodwill from Santa, along with puzzles and a picture to colour in.

"Is the tea made?"

"I'm drinking coffee."

"Coffee?" Head-the-Ball says. "Saints preserve us!"

He looks on as English Jim lifts incoming letters from the large pile to his immediate left. One by one, English Jim roots out the sender's details and the names of any brothers and sisters mentioned. He puts these letters and envelopes aside in a second pile (all paper would be shredded before the end of his shift), then scribbles the return address on a blank envelope from the third pile. These newly-addressed letters are placed in the smallest pile, on the far right.

"Mind if I?" Head-the-Ball asks, removing correspondence that had already been dealt with.

"Be my guest."

Everyone who wrote to the North Pole of course mentioned they'd been good this year. The odd letter began with niceties like *How are you?* and *Hope you are well*. A handful thanked Santa for last year's toys. Several made reference to Rudolph, along the lines of *I'll leave a carrot in the usual place*. Some passed on the warmest regards to Mrs Claus. The majority of letter-writers got straight to the point, though. Ponies featured in the individual wish lists of many girls; the bulk of the boys requested superhero capes and cowls. One shrewd child had made out a detailed list of coordinated clothes she wanted and attached the helpful P.S. *My size is 7/8*. Someone else ratted on a friend: *I wrote before but my classmate Mary Bernadette O'Byrne tore up the letter and laughed*. Another adopted a threatening tone: *I know where you live, you old fart. Get me the train-set my father promised or I'll kick your fat arse!*

Head-the-Ball nudges English Jim, indicates the letter in his hand.

"This one wants a fully furnished doll's house," he says. "Her father drinks like a fish – she'll be lucky to get a doll that wets her nappy."

"When it comes to discriminating against the poor," English Jim says while addressing an envelope, "Santa's no different to everyone else."

Most children had taken great care to compose their words in pencil, on pages ripped from school exercise books. A few had put their sentences down in ink, on small, unruled pages. Mrs So-and-So's only child – the mother was a social climber of the worst kind – hadn't simply availed of personalised stationery, she'd resorted to joined-up writing. The Bank Manager's twin boys had gone one better and typed up their requests on good quality vellum. The School Principal's youngest daughter must have written her request on the presumption that Santa understood, or could at least get his hands on a decent translation of, the Irish language. As with virtually all the other correspondence, the general standard of spelling and grammar was excellent.

"Would you mind including my own two?" Head-the-Ball asks. "I told them they were already on the elves' mailing-list and didn't need to write again this year."

"Consider it done."

Naughty or nice... An all-knowing Santa would be better informed if he relied on small town postmen for his intelligence gathering. All year long, Head-the-Ball made it his business to find out which adults deserved to be on The Naughty List. He'd made a point of reading incoming picture-postcards to see who went where on their holidays and what they had to say about their little breaks. Many locals had to make do with a wet weekend in Rosses Point. Only the select few went abroad in search of the sun. Fewer still could afford to take off on winter skiing breaks. Everyone in town had heard that the Murphys had visited Lapland, were

aware they planned to take the family to Euro Disney as soon as it opened. That time the School Principal, Mr O'Donnell, went to Egypt, he sent home pictures of the pyramids, along with a message written in hieroglyphics. (Mr O'Donnell was probably just being his clever self. But he may of course have written in code as a precaution against the prying eyes of postal staff.) Mick and Maureen from number 27 – Head-the-Ball wanted to know how the hell a fitter could afford it – once spent fourteen nights in Barbados and posted back saucy postcards of women without a stitch on. That last card that local hoteliers Joe and Jacinta had sent Mick and Maureen was something else altogether: *Halsning fran Goteborg*, the caption read. No mountains on the front; no fjords, either – just people out shopping in Kungsgatan and Ostra Nordstan. Head-the-Ball wondered why on earth you'd want to travel that far just to go shopping? Unless Joe and Jacinta were buying mucky films over there.

Sure didn't those shameless Scandinavians have contraceptive vending machines out on the street?

Head-the-Ball holds out the packet, waggles an invitation.

"Go on, won't you?" he smiles. "*Have a Marietta.*"

English Jim indicates he's good, thanks, unfolds the office copy of the *Irish Independent* and removes an eight-page colour supplement entitled *Peace in Our Time*.

"Old habits die hard, I see."

"What's that, Rory?"

English Jim does not raise his eyes up from his broadsheet. Not that there's much to see: just Head-the-Ball going over towards the countertop above the 'fridge to switch the kettle on.

"You're no longer in the metropolis, Séamus."

"I don't follow what you're saying."

You only had to step onto the London Underground, see all the heads buried in reading matter. Perhaps those in the big smoke didn't stop to think what they were missing, why they did what they did. Compared to their country cousins, city folk devoured the written word. Head-the-Ball reckoned they did so to compensate for knowing so little about their neighbours. It also explained why so many of them watched those bloody stupid soap operas.

"Any news?"

"Close on 12,000 Afghan civilians were killed this year," English Jim says, tossing the main body of the newspaper across the table. "I wouldn't want to be in Babrak Karmal's shoes."

"Who would? I meant, any news about yourself? How's the counter working out for you?"

"Fine."

"Not on it today?"

"No."

"And did the aptitude go well?"

"Presumably," English Jim says. "I wouldn't have been called for tomorrow's interview otherwise."

"I heard you did exceptionally well."

"Weren't the results confidential?"

"In theory," Head-the-Ball says, searching for a tea towel. "The end of the month is the deadline for appointments, isn't it?"

"So they say."

"And you've heard nothing yet. That would explain why you're so tense."

"Since when have I been tense?"

"You're being tense right now. Of course that letter from Head Office wouldn't have helped."

"*Which* letter?"

"The warning notice – "

"Remind me again."

"– The one about excessive counter shortages. Four in as many months, wasn't it?"

"Head Office got their facts wrong."

"That wouldn't surprise me, Séamus. But a letter like that would go on file."

Head-the-Ball helps himself to a mug that was stood on the draining board. He gives it a quick wipe, raids a round-shaped teabag from Mick's locker and then douses it with sufficient water from the steaming kettle.

The round bag was rumoured to be the next big thing. Not that Head-the-Ball believed everything he heard. Still, there was no smoke without fire, etc...

Squeezing the bag, he says, "Have you a sup of milk?"

"Try the middle shelf."

Head-the-Ball pulls the 'fridge door ajar, forages.

"You seem interested," he says, retrieving a carton that's been hidden at the back.

English Jim still has his head down, reading.

"What?" he eventually says.

"In the article. You seem engrossed in it. Do you follow current affairs?"

English Jim nods wearily.

"I thought as much," Head-the-Ball decides. "You seem very involved in what you're reading. Personally, I mean."

English Jim looks up from the page, is in foul humour.

"I'm reading about our country," he says, "not some far-flung corner of Siberia."

"You're a very determined man, Séamus, aren't you?"

"I can be."

"Were you born under Mars?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"Oh," says Head-the-Ball. "So what's the piece about?"

"The bombing campaign during the last Bank Holiday weekend," English Jim says, matter-of-factly. "You can have a look when I'm finished."

"Thanks, but no." Head-the-Ball sips, stirs in another heaped spoon of Caruso's sugar. "Scandalous – killing women and children."

"I'll tell you what's scandalous," English Jim says, returning to his read. "The tone of the editorial, that's what. It might as well be a statement from the British Army press office."

"Might it?"

Head-the-Ball absently ogles the back pages of the main newspaper, is pleased to look over much Hollywood muckraking, a sensational item on a certain Bishop's love child, the lead story on the British Royals and a serialised confession from a former TV celebrity who'd hit the bottle following the collapse of his marriage. Head-the-Ball peruses the night's television schedule, reads his horoscope – the Sun in Aquarius – he checks everything except the midweek

soccer results.

"Put twenty patriots in a room and nationalism is bound to mean something different to every one of them."

"Yes," English Jim agrees. "The left bickers over semantics, while the far right consolidates."

"If you say so, Séamus," Head-the-Ball says without conviction. "Would you be a proud Irishman yourself?"

"I guess."

"You're all for preserving our culture?"

"Bits of it."

"I bet you watch satellite television."

"What if I do?"

"Hardly a hanging offence," Head-the-Ball says with a knowing smile. "How would you feel if traditional music disappeared from our lives?"

"I wouldn't care one way or the other."

"Do you ever go set dancing?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Would you read much Irish literature?"

"Off the top of my head, I'd struggle to name a living writer."

"Enjoy any of our composers?"

"None spring to mind."

"Do you follow the local G.A.A. team?"

"I'd rather look at cross-channel soccer."

"Ah, the *foreign* game. Watch any Irish movies lately?"

"God, no. Those made by the French, Germans and Scandinavians give me a much fresher life perspective."

"I see. Might you be a supporter of the coalition government?"

English Jim gives Head-the-Ball a look.

"A stupid question, fair enough. When you shop, do you make an effort to buy home-produced goods?"

"Depends," English Jim says.

"On what?"

"On the quality of the goods on offer."

"Do you speak the Irish language?"

"Who does?"

"More than you'd think."

"I was raised in England and missed out on that part of my education."

Hence, him coming to be known as English Jim round the office...

"But you were *born* here?"

"What is this? The Spanish Inquisition?"

"You *weren't* born here?"

"I've an Irish passport – "

"Yes, yes."

" – What are you saying? That national identity isn't a state of mind? That James Connolly was a Scot because he happened to be born in Edinburgh, Éamon de Valera a Yank, James Larkin a filthy Sasanach from Liverpool?"

"Everyone must call somewhere home," Head-the-Ball ventures. "By the way, did you find a buyer for your place yet?"

"I had no idea my wife and I were selling."

"I saw it advertised the other day, while waiting on a collection in the

auctioneer's."

"Not much escapes you, Rory."

English Jim should really have said he was looking to move – Head-the-Ball could find him a bargain, no problem. He'd always been the man to ask if you wanted to be in the know. Head-the-Ball had told English Jim that the Postmaster was under pressure for taking on a casual without prior consultation with Head Office; he'd been the first to report on the local curate's secret fondness for the fortified grape; and he'd broken the news that the "newly-married" couple in Connolly Park – them with the brown and white Jack Russell that went for your legs whenever you called to the door – had never actually tied the knot.

"I always thought your bungalow was a bit on the cramped side."

"Actually, I'm looking for something smaller."

"Smaller?" Head-the-Ball pounces. "But isn't your wife expecting?"

"Not for a couple of months."

"How is she?"

"Same as always," English Jim says, uncooperative.

"I haven't seen her about for a while."

"Don't worry – I've not buried her under the floorboards," English Jim scowls. "As it happens, I'm looking for somewhere in town."

That's twice now, English Jim's use of the singular: *I'm looking, I'm interested...*

"Are you? If you're interested, there's a place going in one of the flats directly below that fine thing," Head-the-Ball suggests.

"What *fine thing*?"

"The racy one from the deli. Had you still been delivering the post, you'd have noticed the mail piling up on the other side of the glass door one floor below her. The previous tenant dropped dead on a golfing holiday a few Saturdays ago. When they found the body, he had a 2 wood in his hand."

"Had he?"

Head-the-Ball squeezes his tea bag, flips up the lid of a pedal pin.

"I heard," he says, tossing the bag into the bin, "he was playing a short par five."

Just then, The Cousin saunters in with his *Moneysworth* bag-for-life.

"God save all here," he says. "Not on the counter, then?"

"Well spotted, Lieutenant Columbo," English Jim says, reaching first inside and then outside his jacket. He pulls out what looks like a PF99 from his left hip patch pocket.

"At least *he* didn't throw in the towel after a week," Head-the-Ball says.

"I beg your pardon!" The Cousin protests. "When I put my name forward, we knew nothing about yer one on the transfer list."

"Her's is an old application. It'll not be taken up."

English Jim looks up from his newspaper. He asks, "How can you be so sure?"

"She's married now and settled in Dublin."

Head-the-Ball and The Cousin watch English Jim unfold a single sheet of paper and fill in, in untidy block capitals, his name, the name of his office and his gender on the form. Head-the-Ball reflects that, if the Postmaster's daughter arrived in the office, she could choose items of knitwear from double- or single-breasted cardigans. English Jim, meanwhile, inscribes a written request for two pairs of trousers, 34" waist, 32" inside leg, and three long-sleeved shirts, size 15 neck.

"You're never a thirty-four waist," The Cousin quips.

"The pot calling the kettle black..."

"Anyway," Head-the-Ball asks, "what's your hurry filling that in?"

"I know. My postman's uniform only arrived last week."

"After — what? — a three-month wait."

"You'd best mind that uniform," The Cousin says. "It may come in handy one day."

"Maurice, you never said why *you* came off the acting list."

"Who said I came off it?"

English Jim is suddenly interested enough in the conversation to put the 'paper down altogether.

"Eh?"

"I didn't want to lose my Christmas overtime. Or my annual haul of bottles and biscuits."

"And?"

"So I asked for a postponement until the New Year."

"What'll happen to the poor temporary, come January?"

"Like I said, take good care of your postman's uniform — "

"This day keeps getting better."

"And when yer one transfers in, you'll be out the door — "

"It'll not happen, I tell you," Head-the-Ball repeats.

"I ask you, is that any way to treat a relation?"

"I'm your *wife's* cousin, not yours!" The Cousin insists. "Without me, you'd have no job, so show some gratitude, English Jim."

"Remind me to be grateful when you knock me back. And what's with addressing me as English Jim?"

"That's what we call you, behind your back."

"Really? Does anyone else in the office have a nickname?"

"We all do," says The Cousin. "He's Head-the-Ball. And I'm The Cousin."

"In honour of an old romantic involvement with a blood relative," Head-the-Ball is keen to confirm. "How's the missus keeping, Maurice?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"You're still husband and wife, though?"

"On paper."

"Séamus," Head-the Ball says, "would you be in favour of divorce yourself?"

More than once, Head-the-Ball had spotted The Hare's van parked, off-route, in the drive of the bungalow English Jim shared with his wife...

"Absolutely," English Jim says with evident sincerity.

"Why so?" The Cousin Asks.

"It makes sense. When relationships have broken down."

"And how is a couple sure it's reached such a point?"

"*They'll* know."

"For sure," The Cousin agrees.

"So, you're all for marital separation but are against partition of a nation divided by Orange and Green — "

"All this nonsense about the border is irrelevant," English Jim says, "now that we're part of the European Community."

"I see," The Cousin scowls. "You're one of those, are you?"

"One of what?"

"A European."

"If, by that, you mean a Social Democrat who understands the importance of trying to get along with our neighbours, then yes, I'm one of those."

"Spare me."

"Have you got something against Europeans?"

"How long have you got?"

"Ireland was actually a founding member of The Council of Europe. Just after the Second World War – "

Maurice opens the 'fridge door, slams it shut.

"Which one of you spongers finished off my milk?"

No one answers.

"You can buy your own next time."

" – Back then, we signed a treaty on human rights."

"And how's that been going?"

"Everyone under forty should never be allowed to forget the horror of the Second World War," English Jim persists. "And be reminded how good the EC's been at minimising conflicts."

The Cousin is sceptical.

"Up to now. Though it's as toothless as the UN."

"Our main roads," Head-the-Ball accepts, "are better, in fairness."

"But at what price?" The Cousin asks nobody in particular. "The EC has the Post Office in its sights, wants to open up the market to competition."

"Isn't it about time?" English Jim argues.

"You can't mean that? It'd involve sweeping away decades of work practices."

"Why not embrace change, instead of resisting it?"

"Embracing *change*? That's your survival tactic, is it?"

"The Dutch are privatising their postal service."

"Exactly. If that happened here, hundreds of rural Post Offices would close. Give him a history lesson, Rory."

"The Post Office reached the masses with the spread of the railway. In the past one hundred and fifty years, we've all been able to write to family members everywhere, to save and send money," Head-the-Ball says.

"And didn't the telegraph," says The Cousin, "and then the telephone, improve relations with our family across the water?"

"We've had enough change already," says Head-the-Ball.

"True," says The Cousin. "Didn't we strike before the old P&T was split into *An Post* and *Telecom Éireann*?"

"Europe believes competition fosters efficiency," says English Jim.

"Do you honestly feel quality of service will improve, or that prices will fall, once licensed operators handle post across the twelve member states?"

"I'd say a private operator would cherry-pick his markets, cut wages and issue zero-hour contracts."

"Now you're sounding like Donal."

"I suppose I am." Tea-towel in hand, Head-the-Ball reflects. "Has Caruso seemed strange to you lately?"

"No more than usual."

"Is he still in the habit of sneaking off early on Fridays and leaving yourself and Tadhg up you-know-where without a paddle?"

"He is."

"In spite of the official complaint. "

"What complaint was that?" English Jim asks.

"The one made to the Postmaster a few weeks back."

"I'd not heard."

"That's rich. Caruso thinks you were responsible for making the matter public."

"It wasn't me. Though I wish it had been."

"My money's on Dan."

"Did anything come of this complaint?"

"Sweet F.A. Mind you, the Postmaster could hardly do much about it, not when he's inclined to slip off home early on Fridays himself."

"True," The Cousin concludes. "Anything else strange, lads?"

English Jim looks up from the PF99 form.

"They say the Gukurahundi massacres now number some 20,000 – "

"A nice round number."

" – It's Mugabe's way of dealing with dissidents. Don't you be too surprised if Nkomo strikes a deal to become Vice-President."

"You can take it I won't be," The Cousin says. "And don't you be surprised when both men are eventually commemorated on postage stamps!"

"So much for revolution," Head-the-Ball cuts in. "Are things really that different afterwards?"

"I can't speak for post-colonial Rhodesia," English Jim concedes, "But living in the here and now is no cakewalk."

It was the most sensible thing he'd said all morning...