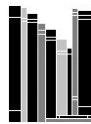


EAMONN LENIHAN

# **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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## ***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"

## 01.

**Head-the-Ball** assesses each detail while continuing to throw up his own delivery: what's said, how it's said, what's chosen *not* to be said. Taken in isolation, and then in total, he considers the secondary elements that shed 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 syllable.

He fully understands how curiosity maintains survival. And is therefore at a loss why none of the senior postmen had staked a claim on this bench. Standing within earshot of Dan, it commands an unbroken view of the man's movements. What's more, the only sorter in the office could be monitored from here without him realising it.

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. Head-the-Ball knows 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 more likely to be interested in the runners and riders of the 3:15 at Haydock Park.

"Having grand aspirations is all very well," he now says. "But mind you don't make 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 is sat next to him. But for some reason – and just two weeks from Christmas Day – the acting clerk has been knocked back to his old grade.

"If it's alright with you, the boss said I could tip around the sorting office today."

"If you must," Dan agrees, a comfortable mat under his feet and a sturdy stool at his side. "Did he say why?"

"He doesn't want me to balance my cash-drawer again this evening," John Bull explains. "Not after doing it last night."

"He'd begrudge you an hour's overtime at this time of year?"

This is Dan's way of saying he himself had lost out on a full day's sorting. But Dan'd not grumble about it, especially since the local union rep was gaining all that overtime at his expense, a sweetener that was certain to buy the new Postmaster a favour or two.

"*Did* you balance?"

"I was £7 down."

"£7?" Dan reflects. "Close enough."

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

John Bull's voice is as flat as his demeanour. Slumping on the edge of a borrowed stool, he already seems long past caring.

"Mind if I put a tape on?"

"I *do* mind," Dan says, giving a stare over the frame of his bifocals. "That devil music you play drives me bananas. Now if you had a lively polka. Or a lovely slow air, a slow air in the hands of a master fiddler – "

Poor old Danny boy was an open book...

" – You young people are a mess. In my day, we hadn't two ha'ppenies to rub together. No word of a lie. But we were content."

"I suppose your generation was happy to make do with your religion and hard luck stories."

"You think it *clever* to genuflect to the rock 'n' rollers? What's there to admire about an eejit up on stage with white smoke coming out of his behind?" Dan says. "You're all set for tomorrow?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, Dan."

"Once upon a time - "

Here we go: story coming. Brace yourself...

" - The Post Office dealt with people. You were told to treat those who cashed pensions as if they were your mother or father. Nowadays, there's no longer time to converse with the customer. All the talk is of transactions, market share and volume of sales. Productivity is the name of the game. Bang! Bang! Bang! Do your business with the public as fast as you can. Back in my day, a clerk had nine months training and a full three months on the counter with a mentor stood over his shoulder. Today, trainees are dropped in at the deep end."

"Is it any wonder there are so many counter shortages?"

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

"How can I help, Dan?"

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

"Fine," John Bull 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 an office adjacent to the staff canteen. Normally, of a Thursday morning, Caruso would be inside, trying to balance the weekly cash account. Today, he was covering John Bull's counter absence on overtime. As ever, the room is furnished with oak desk, three-band stereo radio-cassette, thermostatically-controlled fan-heater, electric kettle, plush leather chair and telephone you could get an outside line on simply by dialing 7. Leaning in towards the closed door, Head-the-Ball is pleased to (just about) detect The Hare jabbering *God bless, God bless and Love to all the family. Then: A White Christmas, Tom?* Followed by what sounds like: *Hope to see you in Chicago one of these days.*

Head-the-Ball knocks and enters.

"That van of mine needs another service," he says without breaking his stride. "Sorry, I thought you were Caruso."

"No, Dan," The Hare says quick as a flash into the mouthpiece, "the keys aren't up here."

The phone is then slammed down into its cradle.

Evidently, The Hare doesn't mind cutting Tom in Chicago off before getting the windy city's long-range weather forecast. What a brazen hypocrite! Delivering premium-rate Christmas greetings at the company's expense...

The onset of December 25th was once more creating the same old issues for postal staff and lay people. The most resourceful parents who'd joined Christmas clubs 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 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 the downgraded clerk has begun dealing with the huge bundle Dan had provided him with. John Bull has also set down a box of reply envelopes embellished with cartoon reindeers. Going on past experience, Head-the-Ball assumes every card inside contains a personal message of goodwill from Santa, along with puzzles and a picture to colour in.

"Did you make a pot, John?"

"I'm drinking coffee."

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

He looks on as John Bull lifts incoming letters from the pile to his immediate left. Once opened, their envelopes are put aside. One by one, John Bull roots out the sender's details and the names of any brothers and sisters mentioned, then scribbles the return address on an envelope from the third pile. Those letters he'd replied to are placed in a fourth pile. They'd be shredded before the end of John Bull's shift.

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

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. 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: *You'd better get me that electric train-set my father keeps promising. I know where you live, you fat old fart*.

Head-the-Ball nudges John Bull, indicates the letter in his hand.

"This one wants a fully furnished doll's house," he says. "Her father never leaves the pub – she'll be lucky to get a doll that wets her nappy."

"I guess Santa's no different to everyone else, when it comes to discriminating against the poor."

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 – wouldn't you know? – had gone one better and typed up their requests on good quality vellum. The School Principal's youngest daughter evidently wrote 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."

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 were naughty or nice. It was always interesting to note, from incoming picture-postcards, 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. 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 return to Disneyland in the summer. After the School Principal, Mr O'Donnell, went to Egypt, he sent home pictures of the pyramids and a message written in hieroglyphics. Mick and Maureen from number 27 – Head-the-Ball wanted to know how the hell a fitter could afford it – spent fourteen nights in Barbados and posted back saucy postcards of women without a stitch on. The 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 you'd want to travel that far to the shops? 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.

"Have another *Marietta*," he says. "Old habits die hard, I see."

"What's that?"

John Bull does not raise his eyes up from his broadsheet; or rather, one that belonged to the office. There's not much to see in any case: Head-the-Ball turning towards the countertop above the 'fridge to switch the kettle on.

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

"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 as a way of compensating for knowing so little about their neighbours. A high percentage of them went as far as watching soap operas to stop themselves going mental.

"Any news?"

"News?" John Bull says. He removes an eight-page colour supplement entitled *Peace in Our Time*, tosses the main body of the newspaper across the table. "Close on 12,000 Afghan civilians were killed this year."

"Is that so?"

"I wouldn't want to be in Babrak Karmal's shoes."

"Who would?" Head-the-Ball answers. "I meant any news about yourself. Is the counter treating you well?"

"Grand."

"How did the aptitude go, by the way?"

"Fine, I guess," John Bull says. "I wouldn't have been called for tomorrow's interview otherwise."

"I heard you did *exceptionally* well."

"Did you? I thought the results were confidential?"

"In theory," Head-the-Ball says distractedly, 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."

"Letter?" John Bull says. "What 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. 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 milk, John?"

"Feel free."

Head-the-Ball pulls the 'fridge door ajar, forages. Turning his head sideways, he says, "You heard the boss' daughter took the test?"

"I thought she was still at university – "

"You thought wrong."

John Bull turns a page, does not lift his head up from the supplement.

"How was she eligible?" he asks.

"She'd worked nights in Head Office last Christmas. After she'd decided not to go back to college, her dad managed to find her a temporary position – "

"In time for the aptitude?"

"But of course," Head-the-Ball confirms. "What's more, she's been taken on as a temporary clerk."

"Good for her."

"Don't you see what I'm saying?"

"You lost me long ago, I'm afraid."

John *was* slow on the uptake.

"Say she's re-assigned to this office – "

"Unlikely."

The fools walk into the trap every time...

"Never rule out any move," Head-the-Ball says, "when management is involved."

"OK. Say she's re-assigned here. Why should I care? I'd be senior to her."

Head-the-Ball finds, tucked away at the back of the 'fridge, a carton containing sufficient milk to colour his tea. He checks that no stench emanates from the lip.

"That's where you're wrong, John. She's a temporary clerk. You're only an actor. She'd be senior to you."

"So she'd get to sign for her holidays before me. Get the first two weeks off in October. And I'd have to settle for the last two..."

Head-the-Ball upends the carton, allows the last drops to drip into his mug.

"If anyone is to come off the counter permanently," he adds, "it'll be you."

Head-the-Ball stirs two spoons of sugar in his tea and sits down.

"You seem interested."

John Bull still has his head down, reading.



"What?" he eventually says.

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

John Bull nods wearily.

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

John Bull looks up from the page, obviously aggrieved.

"It's my business to be," he says.

"Why so?"

"I'm reading about our country. Not some far-flung corner of South America."

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

"I can be."

"Bet you were born under Mars."

"I couldn't tell you."

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

"The bombing campaign during the last Bank Holiday weekend," John Bull 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," John Bull says, returning to his read. "The tone of the editorial, that's what scandalous."

No, despite the hullabaloo, Head-the-Ball needs further convincing that round tea bags were the way forward.

"It might as well be a statement from the Army press office," John Bull says.

"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. Head-the-Ball peruses the night's television schedule, reads his horoscope – the Sun in Aquarius – he checks everything except the midweek soccer results.

"You know as well as I do that you can have twenty patriots in a room and nationalism will mean something different to every one of them."

"The left bickering amongst themselves. While the ultra-right consolidates."

"Exactly. Take yourself," Head-the-Ball supposes. "Would you consider yourself patriotic?"

"I suppose so."

"You're all for preserving our culture?"

"Bits of it."

"I bet you watch satellite television."

"What if I do?"

"Just as I thought," Head-the-Ball says with a knowing smile. "Would you follow the local G.A.A. team?"

"No. I'd be more interested in cross-channel soccer and Ulster rugby."

"How would you feel if traditional music disappeared from our lives?"

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

"Do you read much Irish literature?"

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

"Do you ever go set dancing?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Enjoy any of our composers?"

"None spring to mind."

"Watch any Irish movies lately?"

"No. Those made by the French, Germans and Scandinavians give me a fresher perspective."

"I see. Do you support the current government?"

John Bull 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," John Bull says.

"On what?"

"On the quality of the goods on offer."

"Do you speak the first language?"

"Who does?"

"Some do."

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

Hence, him coming to be known as John Bull 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 — by virtue of their birthplace — James Connolly was a Scot, Larkin a Liverpoolian, de Valera a Yank?"

"Not that it matters to the likes of you and me," Head-the-Ball goads. "We're time-servers, with only one of two choices. And you're not callous enough to commit cold-blooded murder."

Reddening, John Bull swallows the remains of his coffee.

"I meant to ask, were you lucky enough to find a buyer yet?"

"Buyer?" John Bull says. "Did a *For Sale* sign go up outside my house since this morning?"

"I happened to be browsing in the auctioneer's the other day when I saw your place advertised."

John Bull should really have said he was looking to move — Head-the-Ball could find him a bargain, no problem. He'd always been the right man to ask if you wanted to be in the know. Head-the-Ball had told John Bull that the Postmaster was under pressure for taking on a casual without prior consultation with Head Office; Head-the-Ball had 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. "Isn't your wife expecting?"

"Not for a couple of months."

"How's she keeping?"

"Same as always," John Bull says, uncooperative.

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

"In case you're worried, I didn't bury her under the floorboards," John Bull

scowls. "Anyway, I'm interested in somewhere in town."

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

"There's a place going in one of the flats directly below that fine thing," Head-the-Ball suggests.

"Come again?"

"A redhead, you'd know her to see, she works in the deli. If you'd still been delivering post, you'd have noticed the mail piling up on the other side of the glass door one floor below her. The former tenant dropped dead on a golfing holiday three Saturdays ago. When they found the body, he had a 2 wood in his hand."

"Had he?"

"I heard he was playing a short par five." Head-the-Ball stands up, rinses Dan's cup under the cold tap. "Would you be in favour of divorce, yourself?"

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

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

"Divorce seems best for relationships that have broken down," John Bull says.

"Let me get this straight. You're all for a marital split but are against partition of a small country that has irreconcilable political differences – "

"Sure, all this nonsense about the border is irrelevant. Now that we're part of the European Community."

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

"One of what?" John says.

"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." John forcibly puts down his newspaper. "What have you got against Europeans?"

"Didn't I say the EC wants to open up the markets to competition? Didn't I report on the planned closure of rural offices? Haven't I told you the Dutch are privatising their postal service."

"It'll never happen here," John Bull says.

"Why do you think the old P&T was split into *An Post* and *Telecom Éireann*?"

"So it's a conspiracy, is it?"

"Europe believes competition fosters efficiency," Head-the-Ball says. "Do you honestly feel quality of service will improve, or that prices will fall, once licensed operators handle post across the twelve member states?"

"You're some prophet of doom."

"Speaking of which... If profit is the chief motive, private companies will surely cherry-pick their markets, cut wages and issue zero-hour contracts?"

"Now you're sounding like Caruso."

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

"No more than usual."

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

"He is," John Bull says, reaching first inside and then outside his jacket.

He pulls what looks like a PF99 from a patch pocket on his left hip.

"In spite of the complaints. "

John Bull unfolds the single sheet of paper.

"How do you mean?" he asks.

"Caruso thinks you ratted on him to the District Postmaster."

"What?"

Head-the-Ball watches John Bull fill in, in untidy block capitals, his name, the name of his office, and his sex on the PF99 form. He notes that female clerks may choose items of knitwear from double- or single-breasted cardigans, commits the facts to memory. John Bull, meanwhile, ticks a box which states he was an *acting* clerk – ominous, that – and then 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 34 waist," Head-the-Ball says. "What's your hurry filling that in?"

"True. I just received my postman's uniform last week. After a three-month wait."

Just then, The Cousin saunters in with his plastic *Moneysworth* carrier.

"Anything strange, lads?"

John Bull looks up from the PF99 form.

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

"A nice round number."

" – Mugabe's way of dealing with dissidents. Don't be surprised if Nkomo soon does a deal in exchange for becoming Vice-President."

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

"Are things ever that different after the revolution?" Head-the-Ball cuts in.

"Living now, in the real world," John Bull concedes, "that's the hard part."

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