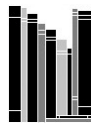


EAMONN LENIHAN

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 various elements that shed light on verbal communication: the grand or subtle hand gestures; the nod and the wink; the crafty and cunning facial expressions; the seemingly innocent inflection on a specific syllable.

He fully understands how curiosity maintains survival. Why none of the senior postmen had staked a claim on this bench is therefore a mystery. 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. 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 another way of saying *Dan* was being denied overtime. Losing out on a full day's sorting, actually. But he'd not grumble about it, especially since the local union rep was gaining all those extra hours at his expense - a sweetener that's bound 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. Slumped on the edge of a borrowed stool, he's long past caring; doesn't care who *knows* he's long past caring.

"Mind if I put a tape on?"

Dan gives a stare over the frame of his bi-focals.

"I *do* mind," he says. "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 marbles and hard luck stories."

"You think it clever to genuflect to the rock 'n' rollers? But what's there to admire about a roaring 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. Caruso would normally be in here balancing the weekly cash account at this time on a Thursday. But this morning he was covering John Bull's counter absence. The room was 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 dialling 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 into the mouthpiece, "the keys aren't up here."

The phone is 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. Delivering premium-rate Christmas greetings at the company's expense, was The Hare: the brazen hypocrite...

The onset of December 25th was again 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 about to be reminded that these sterling efforts once more fell short of their children's expectations. The kids wanted the useless crap advertisers tried to offload by way of 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 those correspondences 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. But the majority of letter-writers got straight to the point and supplied their individual wish list. Many girls requested ponies; the bulk of the boys, superhero capes and cowls. One shrewd child had made out a detailed list of co-ordinated 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 fat old fart. You'd better get me that electric train-set my father keeps promising.*

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 is 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 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 this year."

An all-knowing Santa would be better informed if he relied on small town postmen for his intelligence gathering. Head-the-Ball made it his business to find out which adults were naughty or nice. It was always interesting to note, from the back of 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 Bundoran. Others went abroad in search of the sun. The odd few could afford to take off on winter skiing breaks. Everyone in town had heard that The Murphys had been to Disneyland, were aware they planned to return next year. After the School Principal, Mr O'Donnell, had gone off to Egypt, he sent home pictures of the pyramids and a message written with 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. Why travel that far just to go out 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.

"Have another," he says.

Inviting John Bull to take a second *Marietta* isn't such a generous gesture. In the first place, they weren't his biscuits to be offering round. Besides, the packet was stale. Bringing in stale biscuits was worse than bringing in no biscuits at all: Head-the-Ball would have to have a word with the lads.

"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. Head-the-Ball turns towards the countertop above the 'fridge and switches 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 have been killed so far 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, 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. He turns his head sideways and 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?"

"She'd worked nights in Head Office at 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. Sign for 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 says. "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 all 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. Would you follow the local GAA team?"

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

"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."

"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? 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 had never actually tied the knot (them with the brown and white Jack Russell that went for your legs whenever you called to the door).

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

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

"Smaller? 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 says. "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."

Not long ago, Head-the-Ball had spotted The Hare's van parked, off-route, in the drive of the bungalow John Bull shared with his wife. During work hours...

"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 -"

"We humans are full of contradictions."

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

John Bull forcibly puts down his newspaper. No doubt about it, Head-the-Ball is breaking the lad's resistance down.

"You do seem to know everyone's business but your own. I bet if I asked you anything about the long-term future of this company, you'd stare back at me with your mouth open."

"Now, now, that's out of order. Didn't I tell you about the planned closure of

rural offices?"

"I'll give you that. But do you realize the EC wants to open up the markets to competition?"

Come to papa, rise to the bait...

"There've been reports of the Dutch privatising its postal service."

"It'll never happen here."

"No?" John Bull says. "Why do you think the old P&T was split into An Post and Telecom Éireann?"

"A conspiracy, is it?"

"Europe believes competition fosters efficiency. 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." 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," says John Bull, reaching into his jacket.

He pulls out what looks like a PF99 form from an inside pocket and unfolds the sheet.

"In spite of the complaints."

"How do you mean?"

"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. He notes that female clerks may choose items of knitwear from double- or single-breasted cardigans, commits the facts to memory.

Just then, The Cousin saunters in with his shopping bag, roars *God save all here!* 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," The Cousin says. "What's your hurry filling that in?"

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

"I'll only say this once." The Cousin begins to remove items from his plastic carrier. "*My* locker, *my* food. Try to remember that."

"What are you telling me for?" Head-the-Ball shrugs. "By the way, how's the wife doing in Canada?"

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

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

"I'll give you that," John Bull concedes.

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