

Drowning The Shamrock

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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...

"The Insurrection In Dublin" by James Stephens

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**First Christmas & Easter:
Dec 8th '86 - Apr 16th '87**

01.

Head-the-Ball knows right well: turning the communal radio down always provoked anger amongst colleagues. And yet, this dark morning, he chooses to live dangerously again. Nudging the volume knob, not once but *three* times, reduces Paul McCartney's "Wonderful Christmas Time" to a mere murmur. Like a shot, the other lads shout *Hey!* of course. And Head-the-Ball yields to worker solidarity – as well as pure common sense – by tweaking the sound level back up.

But only by a little.

Going back the way he came, Head-the-Ball loiters near the facing table. Dan's there as usual, going about his business.

"...The size," he hears Dan say, "of a very large cat."

Dan, back straight, sits on a sturdy waist-high stool. He looks on while the newest casual tips out a bag of mail.

"Up comes the dandy to the rusty five-bar gate where I'm standing anyway," Dan says to the younger man, "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 – "

Dan twists on his stool.

"Private conversation here!"

Head-the-Ball refrains from reminding Dan that he's heard the story a million times before. Instead, he puts one foot in front of the other and resumes the short journey back to his own sorting bench.

Hard to believe that a senior postman hadn't staked a claim on such a location. True, the bench looked no different to all others in the office: forty-eight standard pigeonholes, eight across and six up. Being right by the District Postmaster's office may have put the faint-hearts off. Not Head-the-Ball. He actually looked forward to the boss' arrival. The bowed office door being stuck ajar again, Head-the-Ball might lean to his right, as if pointing to one on a clock face, and listen in unsupervised. Now and again, he might also direct a cautious eye towards the clear glass panelling which stretched from the top to the bottom of the door. That way, he could assess not just *what* the Postmaster said, but *how* he said it.

Sadly, the boss rarely showed before 8:30. There was still an hour to kill.

Head-the-Ball's bench, once you took the trouble of turning the radio down a little, stood within earshot of Dan. An unbroken view of the man's movements could be achieved by a ninety degree twist of the head. So the activities of the only sorter in the office could be monitored from here, by sight and sound, without him actually realising it.

Plenty going for the bench then, if – like Head-the-Ball – you believed curiosity was a key element of survival.

Now, listening in at three – rather than one – o'clock, Head-the-Ball considers the nod and the wink, the crafty facial expression, the grand or subtle hand gesture and, you can chalk it down, the seemingly innocent inflection on a specific word or syllable: secondary components which shed *so* much light on verbal communication.

At this instant, Dan falls silent again. Slurping a mug of tea, he pulls a tabloid newspaper apart. The oddball won't be hunting through its pages for juicy gossip or wasting any time gawking at the female glamour on show of course: Dan is more likely to be interested in the runners and riders of the 3:15 at Haydock Park.

"Have your grand aspirations," he says to the young man, now pulling bundles of letters from a pile of mail. "But don't be making a rod for your back."

Dan knows all about grand aspirations, with his keenness to move on from delivering post while lacking the brains to try out as a clerk. Perhaps that was for the best. The latest casual to put his name forward – English Jim – has, for reasons unknown, just been knocked back to his old grade.

"I'm *not* ashamed of being a postman, Dan," English Jim insists. "I've a background in finance and should be making better use of the experience."

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

"I used to think so."

Dan looks down over his bifocals.

"Why do you remain, then?"

"I guess I like the view."

"Séamus, you're a romantic fool." (Dan wasn't in the habit of calling the younger man English Jim to his face.) "How is it you're not on the counter?"

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

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

Dan stands, back straight, a spongy mat between his shined brogues and the concrete floor.

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

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

"Seems that way, Dan. Is that OK with you?"

It would *not* be OK with Dan. Cutting into Dan's overtime was one thing. With English Jim off the counter, Caruso – of all people – would be taking up the slack for the day.

At twice his usual rate of pay.

"I'll try not to make a habit of it," English Jim adds.

"No overtime, blocking everyone else's, little hope of being made a permanent clerk," Dan shakes his head. "Is it any wonder no one else volunteered for the acting position?"

English Jim slumps down on the only stool he could find in the building, the last remaining one, shabby and rickety.

"Mind if I put a tape on?"

"I *do* mind!" Dan says. "The music you like drives me bananas. Now if you

had a lively polka, or a lovely slow air – ”

“The youth of today, eh?”

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

“Your generation,” English Jim supposes, the voice as flat as his demeanour, “must have thrived on hardship and religion.”

“And your own crowd is better, Séamus? Worshipping Pagan Gods who prance around stadium stages with white smoke coming out of their backsides!”

English Jim shrugs.

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.”

“In my day, trainees were told to treat those who cashed pensions like a parent. 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.”

“Times have changed.”

“For sure,” Dan agrees. “I remember when clerks got a full nine months, followed by another three on the counter, with a mentor stood over their shoulder.”

“That might explain the number of counter shortages.”

A gleam lights up the milky-blue eyes behind Dan's bifocals.

“Did you not balance last night?” he asks.

“I was £7 down.”

“Seven?” Dan reflects. “That's close enough.”

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

“How did Caruso once put it? Most employers,” Dan smiles in the remembering, “disperse staff bonuses at this joyful time of year.”

“The man has a way with words.”

“He does, in fairness,” says Dan. “You do intend to do a bit this morning?”

“How can I help?”

“I've the incoming sort bang up to date. Why don't you,” Dan says, stretching to reach a bundle on a nearby sorting bench, “do these for me?”

“Fine,” English Jim quickly decides.

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

Head-the-Ball pauses at the top of the stairs, outside an office next to the staff canteen. Normally, of a Thursday morning, Caruso would be inside, trying to balance the weekly cash account. Today, he'd been in and out already, was below, 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, I'll get over to you, God willing...* And then: *Love to all in Chicago...*

Head-the-Ball knocks and enters.

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

To no avail.

“The keys aren’t up here, Dan,” The Hare says into the mouthpiece, quickly returning the phone to its cradle.

“Sorry,” Head-the-Ball says, “I thought you were Caruso.”

As ever, Caruso’s office is furnished with oak desk, three-band stereo radio-cassette, thermostatically-controlled fan-heater, electric kettle, plush executive chair and the telephone you could get an outside line on simply by dialling the number seven.

“I’d say he’s downstairs,” The Hare replies. “With all this overtime, he’ll owe the new Postmaster a favour or two.”

“Yes,” Head-the-Ball agrees. “That’s probably the plan.”

The annual 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 fell well short of children's expectations.

Kids knew what they wanted: they wanted the crap advertisers were at pains to offload during the winter teatime TV schedule.

English Jim unties the bundle Dan had furnished him with. He sets down, on what was once a dazzling white *formica* table, a fresh box of postage-paid envelopes. These particular envelopes are embellished with red cartoon reindeers.

Head-the-Ball wasn’t born yesterday. He realises, from previous years, that the cards within contain a personal message of goodwill from Santa, along with puzzles and a picture to colour in.

“Is the tea made?”

English Jim sips from a chipped mug.

“I’m drinking coffee.”

“Coffee? Saints preserve us!”

Four small piles confront English Jim. He lifts incoming letters from the pile furthest to the left. One by one, he roots out the sender's details and the names of any brothers and sisters mentioned. He places these letters and envelopes in the second pile (to be shredded before the end of his shift), then takes a blank envelope from the third pile, scribbles the return address. These newly-addressed letters are placed in the fourth 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 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. For many girls, ponies featured in the individual wish lists; 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 come round and 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's a drunk – she'll be lucky to get a doll that wets her nappy."

English Jim finishes scrawling an address on an envelope.

"When it comes to discriminating against the poor," he finally says, "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 presumed that Santa understood, or could at least get his hands on a decent translation of, the Irish language.

"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."

English Jim flashes an understanding smile.

"Consider it done," he says.

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 see which adults deserved to be on The Naughty List. Every picture-postcard on his delivery route was scrupulously inspected to confirm who went where on their holidays and what they had to say about their little breaks. Many locals made do with a couple of rounds of golf in Enniscrone, or a wet weekend in Rosses Point. Only a select few ventured abroad in search of the sun. Fewer still could afford to take off on winter skiing breaks – everyone in town knew that the Murphys had visited Lapland, were aware they planned to take the extended 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 usual clever self, but perhaps deployed code as a precaution against prying eyes.) 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 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 on earth travel all that way just to go shopping? Might Joe and Jacinta have been buying mucky films over there?

And 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?”

Rory? Head-the-Ball is so seldom called by his Christian name, he almost forgets it’s his own.

“You’re no longer in the metropolis.”

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

“Any news?”

“Close on twelve thousand Afghan civilians have been 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?” Head-the-Ball agrees. “Not on the counter today?”

“No.”

“And you fared OK in the aptitude?”

“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?” English Jim asks.

“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 grabs a mug that’s stood on the draining board, then gives it a quick wipe. He raids a round-shaped teabag from Mick’s locker, douses it with sufficient water from a 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...

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

“Middle shelf.”

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

“You seem interested,” he says, retrieving the small carton positioned behind a lunch-box.

English Jim has his head down, reading.

“What’s that?”

“You seem engrossed in the article. Do you follow current affairs?”

English Jim nods wearily.

“You seem very involved in what you're reading. Personally, I mean.”

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

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

“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. “Feckin’ 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.”

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.

“Might it?”

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.”

English Jim nods agreement.

“The far right consolidates while the left bickers over semantics.”

“Would you,” Head-the-Ball says, “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 smiles. “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," says Head-the-Ball. "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."

"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?"

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

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

"I saw your house advertised the other day, while waiting on a signature in the auctioneer's."

"Not much escapes you, Rory."

English Jim should really have mentioned he was on the move – Head-the-Ball would find him a bargain, no problem. Round here, he'd always been the man 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 fondness for the fortified grape; and it was Head-the-Ball who'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 on the lookout for something smaller."

"Smaller?" Head-the-Ball considers. "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* interested, *I'm* looking...

“You don’t say? There’s a place going in one of the flats directly below that fine thing,” Head-the-Ball suggests.

“What *fine thing* is that?”

“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 – ”

“Right.”

“The previous tenant dropped dead on a Spanish golf course a few Saturdays ago. When they found the body, he had a two wood in his hand.”

“Had he?”

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

“I heard,” he says, gently releasing the foot pedal, “he was playing a short par five.”

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.

“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.”

English Jim pulls out what looks like a PF99 from his left hip patch pocket.

“Her’s is an old application,” Head-the-Ball asserts. “It’ll not be taken up.”

“You sure about that?”

“Absolutely. She’s married now and settled in Dublin.”

Head-the-Ball and The Cousin look on while English Jim unfolds a single sheet of paper and fills in, in untidy block capitals, his name, the name of his office and gender on the form. English Jim inscribes a written request for two pairs of trousers, 34" waist, 32" inside leg, and three long-sleeved shirts, size fifteen neck.

“You’re never a thirty-four waist,” The Cousin says.

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 advises. “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 his biro down.

“I didn’t want to lose my Christmas overtime,” The Cousin explains. “Or my annual haul of bottles and biscuits.”

“And?”

“So I asked for a postponement until the New Year.”

Head-the-Ball looks across at English Jim.

“And what’ll happen to the poor temporary, come January?”

“Like I said, take good care of your postman’s uniform – ”

English Jim is not a happy bunny.

“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 his *wife’s* cousin!” The Cousin insists. “And, without me, he’d have no job. So a little gratitude is in order.”

“Remind me to be grateful when you knock me back,” English Jim says.

Were the Postmaster’s teenage daughter to arrive in the office, she could choose items of knitwear from double- or single-breasted cardigans. But Head-the-Ball chooses not to bring this up with The Cousin.

Instead, he asks, “How’s Maureen keeping, Maurice?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“You’re still husband and wife, though?”

“On paper.”

“Séamus,” Head-the Ball continues, “would you be in favour of divorce yourself?”

“Absolutely,” English Jim reasons. “It makes sense once a relationship has broken down.”

Head-the-Ball fails to mention that, on three separate occasions, he’d spotted The Hare’s van parked, off-route, in the drive of the bungalow English Jim shared with his wife.

“And how is a couple sure it’s reached such a point?”

“*They’ll* know,” The Cousin interrupts. “You can take my word for it.”

“It’s ironic. 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.”

The Cousin glowers at English Jim.

“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 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 – ”

The Cousin opens the fridge door, slams it shut.

“Which one of you spongers finished off my milk?”

No one answers.

“Buy your own next time!”

“ – Back then, we signed a treaty on human rights,” says English Jim.

“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. And it’s as toothless as the UN.”

“Our main roads,” Head-the-Ball concedes, “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.”

“The Dutch are *privatising* their postal service,” Head-the-Ball says, introducing a sense of foreboding.

“Exactly. If that happened here, hundreds of rural Post Offices would close. Give English Jim a history lesson, Rory.”

“The Post Office reached the masses after the spread of the railway,” Head-the-Ball says. “For one hundred and fifty years, every Tom, Dick and Harry has been able to write to loved ones, to save and send money.”

“And didn’t the telegraph,” says The Cousin, “and then the telephone, improve relations with our family members across the water?”

“That’s all true,” says English Jim. “But 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?”

“I’d say private companies will cherry-pick the market, 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,” The Cousin says.

Head-the-Ball turns to English Jim.

“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?”

“The one made to the Postmaster a few weeks back.”

“I’d not heard,” English Jim says.

“That’s rich. Caruso thinks you were responsible for making the matter public.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“My money’s on Dan,” says The Cousin.

“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 twenty thousand – ”

“A nice round number.”

“It’s Mugabe’s way of dealing with dissidents.”

“Is it?”

“But 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 and the dream of a brighter future,” English Jim cuts in. “Living in the here and now is no cakewalk.”
It was the most sensible thing he’d said all morning.

02.

The Squaddie holds a hanky over his mouth and has a good think. A bloody good think...

If you could only see me now, mum – knee-deep in rubble and about as useful as a eunuch in a harem. It's a joke, a flipping scream... Officially, I'm doing my bit to create a political structure that will allow the province to be governed normally. Right... I know – everyone knows – that's just a poncy way of saying I'm here to harass the locals. By carrying out random vehicle checks or, you know, setting off on foot patrol and combing the streets, streets that remind me so much of home.

I hated home. There! Finally able to say it. I hated how you positioned empty milk bottles so neatly on the front doorstep. I hated how the washing flapped dry on the rotary clothesline out back. I hated those boring Saturday tea-times when we were slumped in front of the telly, stuck for something to say to each other. I hated the stink of meat and two veg Sunday roasts...

Those rotten little houses our neighbours called home should have been pulled down years ago, mum. They're just like the slums here. They even have the same outside bog...

“Over here. Jump to it, man!”

Admit it, mum. You and dad are stuck in a horrible rut. Still together after all this time because you don't have the imagination or courage to do something about the situation. And miserable as hell: I can tell from your letters. You don't have to be a flipping genius to suss that much...

“And put that bloody cigarette out!”

*I'm still minding myself, having such a **won**-derful time. Sorry I didn't get round to writing, mum, but I've been really busy. Your darling son has blackened up his face, dealt with tactics at patrols and base-camp levels, paddled about in a canoe, crawled under bleeding barbed-wire fences, parachuted from 5,000 feet up. Can't say much else – Official Secrets and all that. I did do a reconnaissance course that showed the right way to clear a route for my oncoming battalion.*

Tell that to your friends next time you're down at the bingo!

I also looked at hundreds of pictures of rank markings, beret crests and insignia and – because I attended a first aid seminar – I now know how to fix a nosebleed.

But none of that helps now, mum. Doesn't help one bit.

“Wise up, soldier! There's probably a gas leak.”

“I didn't think – ”

“You didn't think?”

“I couldn't smell the fumes, mate.”

For the stink of burning flesh...

Am I that thick? What I mean is, me thinking I'd be getting a life when I joined up as a private. Perhaps – as dad felt – those bits of paper would have helped me enlist as an apprentice. What the hell? My sort – no matter how many GCSEs we have to our name – just don't enrol in cadet school. And any way you look at it, school was – sorry, mum – such a waste. Can you really blame me for getting out of there like a shot? Out of the

frying pan, you said... Let's see: canning plant, supermarket checkout, bookies' office – noble professions, Christ, yes. No wonder I was in and out of day-jobs like a yo-yo. Right up to that Saturday afternoon when a bevvied up pal from the slaughterhouse dared me to put my pool cue down and pop along to the Army Recruitment Office...

It started off as a laugh, you know, requesting more information while Jack – you remember Jack, mum, don't you? He ended up in the nick, did Jack – while Jack stayed outside and pressed his nose against the shop-front window and made faces at me. This prissy one on the desk pretended not to notice at first and handed me leaflets to have a gander at later. Outside, Jack made paper aeroplanes out of them. As you can see, he said, I'm more RAF material myself.

Flipping comical...

*I read the brochures after sobering up the next afternoon. It took a couple of days for the bleeding obvious to sink in. But when it did – Gordon Bennett! – I sussed I had little to lose by joining up. And it hasn't been **all** bad, mum. I've learned how to drive, how to have a laugh and a joke with some good mates. How to handle a gun... I've money to spend, on things I always wanted to spend it on. 'Course it's not all plain sailing, either. I could have done without that square-bashing crap – left-right, left-right. A bit like being back at school. But a small price to pay for not doing sweet F.A. back home...*

How's dad, by the by? Is he, you know, still hitting the bottle? He can't half knock it back. Tell the old sod I said hello...

“Give me a hand here! I think I've a live one!”

So why am I where I am, like a spare prick at a wedding? Excuse the French... I just happened to be close by, mum, that's all. Intelligence gathering... Round the corner from the scene of the crime. Patrolling a street in the vicinity...

When the explosion came, it was not at all like you'd imagine. Nothing more than a dull thud. The sound of glass shattering happened next. The muffled screams that followed were horrible, mum. We'll leave it at that... Then the moaning, moaning like I've never heard before. I was rooted to the spot, not moving a muscle, when some geezer grabbed me by the arm, flashed I.D. and said he needed my help.

“Quick! Over here!”

Do you remember I'd hoped to be posted somewhere nice after I enlisted?

It rains round the clock here and there's sod all to do. Plenty of sight seeing, for sure – but how often do you want to look at a faraway lump of rock? And I'm no closer to knowing why the natives are squabbling... God and religion is in there somewhere. If there's one thing I remember from Sunday school it's that all religions – whatever else they harp on about – preach tolerance and understanding...

Not much bleeding hope of tolerance and understanding round here. Why else would I have a rifle in my hand, be looking for subversives before they found me?

Yes, you've got to watch yourself in these parts... Some of the boys can't hack the pressure. One did a runner last week. I promise never to go A.W.O.L., mum. For starters, I'd miss the soccer pitch we have here. Never seen such sports facilities. Cricket nets, grass courts for tennis – the best...

'Course it's rarely as bad as the papers make out. Looters are so easy to find – my advice is to start with electrical shops. That stereo radiogram I gave you last month was actually confiscated from a couple of pimply teenagers. I must confess I still feel bad about keeping it...

Some of the lads stationed here are all for pressing their advantage, for throwing their weight round. Sometimes, when I see the way they treat women, I feel like thumping them. Or at least speaking out.

I never say a word of course – my life depends on the men around me.

But you'll be glad to hear I've not been tempted to make the most of my position. I've never aimed my rifle at innocent bystanders. I haven't fired a single shot yet, straight up. I'll be involved in very few incidents, touch wood...

"Don't move the body!"

"Sorry," The Squaddie says.

"What are you thinking? The thighbone's probably broken. Moving the body could puncture a major artery."

"I said I was sorry, mate."

"Don't be sorry! Be careful!"

So far, you know, most of my run-ins have been with youngsters. Egging you on, shouting taunts, lobbing stones and stuff like that... A bit of a handful, are the teenagers. Now and again I just want to laugh my socks off at them. There's the usual 'No Go' areas, natch – you stay away from them, if you know what's good for you. Unless you want to be flipping John Wayne...

"Pour some water on the burns."

"Will do."

I'm doing my best to hold it together, mum. Right now plasma – they tell me – is seeping through. Really disgusting, take my word for it.

"Here," a plain clothes copper says. "Use this as a bandage."

"Thanks."

"Loosen the clothing! Keep the body warm! He's probably in a state of shock!"

Thank Christ! Fire engine arriving at long last... And the first firefighter is legging it over.

"What's the story?" he asks, out-of-breath.

Is a local, by the sound of his accent.

"Don't know," The Squaddie says. "Just got here myself."

"Gas leak?"

"Couldn't tell you."

There's a smell of booze off this fireman's breath.

"Did we interrupt your night out?"

"Again," comes back the reply, sarcy.

Other firemen are running about like headless chickens. Stumbling, fumbling – can't be Brahms and Liszt this early in the day, can they?

"Did we get the all-clear on a possible second bomb?"

The sweat's pouring off me. I pull off my helmet, push back my sopping-wet hair, wipe grime from my forehead.

"Don't know."

"You're a mine of information!"

It's bloody stupid. Impractical... Having to move about with all this gear on. Slows you down no end, makes you an easy target...

"I happened to be passing – "

"Skip it."

*Most people seem nice enough. As nice as you **could** be to a man walking down your street in combat fatigues. Folk don't, you know, offer mugs of tea or anything like that. Heard they used to, when our boys first arrived. We were the good guys then...*

"You got a problem, mate?" The Squaddie says.

"You're the problem!"

Most geezers are alright, though. Will talk to you.

"You keep on like that, sunshine," The Squaddie says, "and I'll have to

shut your mouth for you.”

“Oh?” says the prat in a fireman-hat. “You and who else?”

Some people here will even have a laugh with you every so often, try to see the funny side... Mothers, especially – when they're not asking about one of their sons. They must worry themselves sick, those young mothers. Just like you, mum.

“Get down, you idiot!” the copper shouts across.

Now and again it all seems so normal. No way is it normal...

“I said get – ”