

***Father  
McGargles***

**Norman Morrow**

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**To my family.**

Success is not a measure of the result, but of the journey.

## Chapter 1.

To savour the delights of an artery-clogging breakfast fry-up, one must do the job properly. After dispatching a few crumbs and stray grease from his lips with a swift wipe from his sleeve, James Brennan lit his first cigarette of the day. A concerto of belches, farts and spluttering coughs confirmed him ready to face the monotonous duties that were the daily life of a parish priest.

As he took the last pull of the cigarette, he glanced at the horrendous yellow clock on the mantelpiece. Absence of religious or gothic overtones saved it from being thrown in the bin. Above it hung a picture of the Sacred Heart, to its right a wooden cross. Behind him, the gaggle of Popes, all lined up in gold frames, glared down on his back.

He contemplated a quick gin before donning his frock and making his way to the church. However this was Lent, so he fought the demons that suggested a large glass would make the saying of Mass and the hearing of confessions more endurable.

‘Bacon and cabbage this evening,’ shouted his housekeeper Maggie, as he made towards the front door.

*Jesus, Mary and Joseph! If Christ had to eat Bacon and Cabbage five days a week, he would have nailed himself to the cross. ‘Thank you, Maggie. That’s something I look forward to. I’m off to say Mass.’*

James had only reached the front gate when he remembered he’d left his fags on the hallstand. On his way back, through the dining room window, he saw Maggie, and from the looks of things, she stood pouring herself a glass of gin with one hand and had her mobile held to her ear with her other.

He growled, and eased open the door. At the mention of his name, he stopped and listened to Maggie’s agitated chattering. ‘Bloody priest, what curse is on me that I have to cook bacon and cabbage five days a week?’

To stifle a burst of laughter, James clamped his mouth with his hand as he made his way out and down the path again.

It was a short walk from the priest's house to the Church. With each passing year, it seemed to get longer, each lethargic step a battle. This morning, he spotted Emily Jane, as she shuffled up to the main gate. He strolled past the side entrance and caught up with her. Twice in the past six months, he'd given her the last rites. Each time she'd walked towards the light, she'd given it a two-fingered salute and returned. "God had his hands out, beckoning me to come," she'd claimed. "But I could see my daughter's hands open and eager to accept her inheritance. I winked at the Almighty. Eternity could wait a while, as could the extension my daughter planned for her house."

Like many actresses and dancers, she exuded an infectious zest for living. He enjoyed her company, for she lit up the world with her wit, determination and, above all, her contempt for pomp or ceremony.

'Good morning, Emily, you look like shite! Have you been smoking the cannabis again?'

Emily lifted her walking stick and struck his knee, gentle enough so that there would be no long-term damage, and hard enough that he grimaced.

'Brennan, that's for thinking you had the right to send me on my way to meet your boss before I was ready. A few more dances are left in these withered legs. The cannabis keeps the pain at bay. You mind your own business.'

'You arty-farty types are all the same. One law for you and one l... Ouch!'

'And priests don't think themselves a law unto themselves?'

With Emily's walking stick poised to strike for the third time, he declined to answer. 'Come! Let us waltz.'

The offer of a dance could not be refused. With a tender hand, he aided her up the steps and into the church. They stopped inside and Emily blessed herself with holy water. Her laughter echoed off the cold walls after she cupped her hand and splashed James.

'Brennan, when was the last time you showered? Dry yourself and get into character. You're playing a priest today, are you not?'

She understood him like no other person he'd ever met. His spirit lifted by this remarkable woman, he marched up to the altar.

Looking down over his ever decreasing and decrepit audience, his shoulders sagged. Every day, the same wrinkled faces of the faithful sat and prayed. His duty worn thin through ritual and boredom, had long since lost its meaning, Desiring only to be finished, he folded his arms and stared at the two elderly ladies, who stood lighting candles at the back of the church, urging them to take their seats. He raised his eyes, and not for the first time, counted the wooden crossbeams that were running the length of the church, realising that soon, his years as a priest would exceed their number.

The door clanged, shaking him from his near slumber. A man lurched up the aisle, glanced around and slid onto the nearest pew. Watching the newcomer peer out between his cap and the upturned lapels of his overcoat, James smirked, amused at this miserable attempt at being inconspicuous. The two ladies, now kneeling in front of the candle stand, glanced in the stranger's direction, gave him the evil eye and then continued their little ceremony. The man bowed his head as though the pretence of silent prayer would make him invisible. As the two women waddled to the front pew, James wondered if the fellow was lost.

One of the ladies stumbled as she stepped into a pew, causing a commotion. This stirred him to action. He nodded at the two altar boys. On cue, they genuflected before taking their positions on stage.

'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'

All through the Mass, he glanced at the stranger, noting his bowed head and occasional furtive glances at others, apparently unsure of when to sit or stand. During a reading from the Old Testament, the newcomer had a fit of sneezing. Instinctively he raised a hand to his nose, revealing his mobile phone. When he realised James looked in his direction, he panicked and dropped it.

James stopped midsentence, growled as the phone clattered on the floor, glared at the stranger and then continued. From the Liturgy to the Eucharist, he inwardly groaned at the monotony of this daily ritual. He raced through the concluding rites, dismissed the Mass goers, and in order to avoid idle chat, he bounded towards the confessional.

Sealed from prying eyes, the good Father read through texts on his phone, paying particular attention to those from his army of horse racing tipsters. At the sound of approaching footsteps, he switched off the phone. The door of the confessional opened and closed, announcing the arrival of a penitent.

James waited a moment and then coughed. He scratched his bearded chin as he waited for a response.

'Ahem!'

'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been a while since my last confession'.

'Has it, my son, how long?'

'Err ..., twenty-four years, Father.'

*Twenty-four years. O Lord, this is a real sinner.* 'You must have a lot to confess,' he said, glancing at his watch. *I'll miss getting to the bookies.* In his well-practised confessional voice he continued, 'Christ forgives the most ardent sinner. Open your heart and tell me of your multitude of sins.'

'No multitude, Father, just one. Jealousy.'

'What are you jealous of?'

‘Jimmy Egan, Father.’

A grin stole over James’s face. Jimmy Egan lived in a mansion outside the village. Wealthy, despicably handsome and captain of the local golf club, these were the recipes for envy. Jimmy sat at the head of every committee, was everyone’s best friend, and had a wife so beautiful that Miss World would seem like an old sea hag in her company.

‘Say three Hail Marys and have no more thoughts about Jimmy’s wife.’

‘No! It’s the fishing, Father. I get to the river twice a week, but Jimmy goes every day.’

James almost fell off his stool in shock. In thirty-seven years of being a priest, he’d never been faced with such a confession.

‘Envy, my son, is one of the Seven Deadly sins. Jealousy is a close relative. Say one Our Father when you get home. Now wait outside until I rid myself of this frock. In the name of the Father, and of Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.’

James appeared from behind the church, dressed in his civilian clothes. Wearing a tattered jumper over a pair of baggy jeans, it did not seem possible that this dishevelled looking man had earlier been perched on his high altar, delivering the word of God to the faithful.

But for the cap, tilted sideways above his mop of mousy hair, the stranger from the confessional would have melded into the greyness of the church. Hands deep in his pockets, he shuffled his feet as James strode in his direction.

‘Ah, my jealous sinner remains concealed beneath his cap. Would you have a name?’ said James.

‘I’m Liam O’Brien. You may remember my devout mother, Lorenza.’

Confident hazel eyes, also intent on probing, were set above high cheek-bones. In his early thirties, broad shoulders filled his winter coat, and his firm handshake contradicted his earlier furtive behaviour.

‘Lorenza O’Brien, of course I do. Of Italian extraction if my memory is honest. The resemblance is there, in your eyes, though sadly not in your devotions. I’m curious. Do you usually use your mobile phone at Mass?’

‘I was talking to Google.’

‘What?’

‘I asked Google how to make a confession.’

‘Add a second Our Father to your penance, and if you don’t know the words to Our Lord’s Prayer, you can ask Google.’

Liam grinned. ‘I’ll do that, Father.’

‘Good man. Are ya busy on Friday morning?’

‘I might be. Why do you ask?’

'I haven't discussed fishing in years and your confession leaves me more than a little curious. Can you meet me after Mass on Friday morning for a pint and a quick chat about your jealousy?'

'Grand, as long as it's about fishing and not religion.'

'Is there a difference?' said James.

## Chapter 2.

Situated some forty miles from Dublin, the rural village of Castlebridge nestled between a motorway and the river Shereen. With little land available for development, it had for the most part, remained unmolested by the Celtic Tiger. Unremarkable, forgettable, few cars that daily zipped up and down the motorway had cause to take the Castlebridge exit. A treasure in some respects, it remained a quaint reminder of times past and a way of life where the mundane can lead to happenings with unusual consequences. Such is the way of many similar villages, where the disappearance of a randy dog would invite more discussion than a general election.

Sean Lavelle, proprietor of Lavelle's pub, stood in the lane outside the back gate, leaned on his sweeping brush and muttered obscenities. As James approached, Sean set to work and raised his voice. 'Do I look like a muck sweeper, a cleaner-upper, or am I just soft in the head. Cleaning the chip shop's rubbish from this lane is giving me lumbago.'

'All three, in no particular order,' said James, walking through the mound of rubbish gathered by Sean, scattering most of it. Striding through the rear entrance to the pub, he pointed to the disarray in the backyard. 'A pig that grunts at other's rubbish should clean his own backyard first. Stop fussing like an old sow and pull me a pint.'

In his wake, he heard Sean slam the gate, a bottle break, and a plethora of curses followed him all the way to the bar.

Middle-aged, rough at the edges and balding in the middle, Sean appeared of average height when standing on the raised floor behind the counter. In building the floor, his deceased father, challenged by a similar stature, had halted the flow of midget jokes previously cursing generations of Lavelle's. Well almost, there is always one mischievous dissenter, and he now sat waiting for his pint, ready to parry any thrust from Sean's limited vocabulary. Silence followed the pint onto the counter and continued when James stuck his thumb in the creamy head, and sucked it.

'Sean, if one waits long enough, miracles happen. That is one of your better pints.' His whispered taunt purpled Sean's face. On the

cup of an expected explosion, he cushioned the blow. 'Mind, this is still the best pub in town. Is there a smidgen of gossip worth reporting to me?'

'No. Nobody tells me anything. Knowing you would weasel it out of me, they keep their gobs shut.'

'My fault? By the way, one of the fishing lads came to Mass this morning. Liam O'Brien, do you know him?'

'Lorenza's youngest lad, he is a decent skin but quieter than a moth. Is he sick or something? He's too young to be paying your wages.'

'Ask him yourself on Friday. He is joining me here to discuss everything and anything piscatorial.'

'Pisca...?'

'Piscatorial is fishing. Do you know anything beyond pulling flat pints?'

Frowning, Sean leaned across the counter. 'Fishing? I thought the Bishop slammed the door shut on all fishing activity.'

James sunk his pint and grinned at Sean. 'True, but partaking and talking about fishing are worlds apart. Besides, his Eminence is now harassing God and everyone who passed through the pearly gates. Liam has given me an itch and an itch must be what?'

'Scratched. I smell a storm coming,' said Sean.

'No, no storm, S...S...Sean. It's me, Pups,' said a familiar voice from the front bar.

James swivelled on his stool. He saw Evan 'Pups' O'Leary leering around the corner that led to out front. Pups doffed his cap and muttered. 'Good morning,' as James grabbed him by the collar, and whisked him toward the back door.

If Pups had a tail, it would have wagged. Rubbing his hands to take the chill away, he hopped around the yard, and avoided too close a contact with the priest. An only child, innocence had followed him from the crib and likely to the grave. That is not to say he played the fool willingly. Pups' misfortunes stemmed from a stammer and his inability to separate dreams from reality, friend from foe. Preoccupied with the training of greyhounds, this passion consumed him and amused others. Relying on his homespun methods, he produced happy hounds, but their pedigree and ability on the track was hardly likely to be the stuff of legend.

James glared at Pup's. 'What are you doing here?'

Pups shuffled his feet, stuck his hands in his pockets, and stammered, 'J...J...James, sorry to intrude on yer, yer drinking. I need a few quid for the d... do...'

'Spit it out for fecks sake.'

'Sorry, Fa... Father, a few quid for the dog.'

‘Afflicted by a terrible hangover on the day I buried your poor mother, I made a fatal mistake. When you offered me half a share in a hound, I should’ve told you to shove it up your arse. Do you see ‘BANK’ written on my forehead?’

‘No! I see a wise investor that will qua...quadruple his money.’

‘All right, stop squawking and give me one good reason to open my wallet again.’

Pups, at the mention of the wallet, ceased stuttering and pointed to his dishevelled head. ‘Pussy has a plan.’

‘Pussy always has a plan. Out with it, ya fool.’

‘Castlebridge Lad is the fastest hound that I ever bred, but he has one small problem ...’

‘Yeah, his bloody trainer!’

‘He still refuses to pass the other dogs. For the past week I made him chase Old Ned around the field.’

‘And?’

‘Old Ned keeled over onto his back, raised his paws, and the poor divil died. I swear Castlebridge Lad looked like he was about to race past him.’

‘Jesus! A one legged, blind poodle could have beaten Old Ned. I’ve heard enough.’

‘Wa...wait, Father. I’m getting Old Ned stuffed and mounted onto a skateboard.’

James’s mouth opened, incredulity hampered his speech and mirth tempered his reply. ‘For Sale. Dead hound on wheels. One careful owner. Low mileage.’

Pups rubbed his ear, grinned widely, and raised his hands in submission.

‘Funny idea, but Pussy has a better one. I’m having a frame welded to a skateboard so that I can tow it around with my bicycle.’

Unable to take much more, James sat on an empty keg.

‘Just so I’m reading this correctly. You are going to cycle around the parish, towing a dead greyhound on a skateboard with a For Sale sign on its back.’

‘Apart from the sign, that is exactly what I’ll do. I only need two hundred.’

‘Here’s three hundred, the extra is in case you need an undertakers licence. Let me know when you are ready to go. As God is my witness, I would pay double to see a dead mutt on a skateboard, chase a gobshite on a bicycle.’

‘Ya...ya w...won’t regret it.’ Pups snatched the loot and hugged James.

James’s pledge to a dying mother tested the depth of his wallet and the limits of his patience. In keeping Pups out of harm’s way, his affection for the lad took him into the realms of parenthood. Still

laughing after Pups had left by the back gate, he sauntered toward the bookies, wondering as he went. *What prompted Liam to make that confession?*

### Chapter 3.

At the end of Mass on Friday, James announced that confessions were cancelled. Excited at the prospect of meeting Liam, he discarded his uniform, raced outside and whistled when he spotted Liam sitting on the boundary wall.

‘It’s a cold one, Liam. C’mon let’s find a high stool.’

Leaving the church by a side gate, Liam followed him down the narrow lane. The priest walked even faster than he said Mass. Though he appeared fit, Liam struggled to keep abreast. James stopped outside Lavelle’s rusty gate, paused for a moment, glanced around and then banged on it three times. He winked at Liam.

‘This is the tradesman’s entrance for us workmen. A man of the cloth can’t be seen going in the front door, especially this time of the morning.’

A few minutes later, someone knocked twice on the far side and the gate opened just wide enough for them to enter. Sean nodded at the priest and winked at Liam.

‘The coast is clear, no busybodies around this morning.’

They led Liam through a yard littered with crates of empty bottles and kegs. The lingering stench of stale beer would deter all but professional drinkers. A black and white cat eyed them from a window ledge. James grabbed an empty tin off the top of a rubbish bin and hurled it towards her. Eyes narrowed, she watched the spiralling tin with a contemptuous gaze. When it struck the wall to her left, she leapt onto the roof of the shed beneath, and darted over the sidewall to relative safety.

‘Liam, cats are sneaky creatures. Sorry for dragging you in this way.’

Liam blurted, ‘That’s a terrible cruel thing to do. Did you ever hit the poor cat?’

‘Don’t be daft. I always aim a little to the left. That cat would be as fat as a fool if it didn’t get some exercise.’ He grabbed a second can, took aim, and it struck the windowsill dead centre.

In through a small kitchen, the priest led Liam to the dim backroom. He gestured to Liam to sit on one of the stools, while he

settled on the other and toyed with his cigarette lighter. Liam removed his cap, the offending item that had brought him to James's notice some days earlier. The ravages of life had yet to etch his forehead, lighten his hair or blemish his youthful face.

'The usual?' Sean arranged two beer mats on the counter.

'Saying Mass is thirsty work. Two pints and two whiskeys. No make that two and two large ones.'

When two large whiskeys arrived, Liam raised his hands.

'Not for me, Father, it's far too early. I'm not a drinker as such.'

'Nonsense, confessions require a loose tongue and that's the best tongue loosener in the parish. So, you fish a bit?'

'I do. I have been addicted to fly fishing for years. Did you ever try it?'

James scratched his beard, laughed and turned to Sean, as he arrived with two creamy pints of Guinness.

'Liam would like to know if I ever caught a trout. Show him the picture. *Sláinte!*'

Sean placed a black and white framed photograph on the counter. Fingers fumbling, eyes riveted to the image, Liam whistled as he read the inscription. 'Shereen Anglers June Competition 1973, Winner: Father James Brennan, One Trout. 5lbs-11oz.' Arms folded, James smirked, as did Sean.

'Father, that's a decent trout,' said Liam.

'James Brennan, they christened me. So, as long as we are in Lavelle's pub, James will do. Now, tell me about your jealousy.'

'Father, sorry, I mean, James, I'll get straight to the point. Every year, Egan wins most of the monthly competitions. Until recently, I couldn't get to the river often enough. More through embarrassment than anything, I neglected to tell my wife that I was put on a three day week at work, and that meant two extra days on the river.'

'Did you hear that? Deceiving his wife to go fishing, it's disgraceful. Keep going! Another two pints, barman, and open the skylight so I can have a smoke.'

Built like a Sumo wrestler, Sean folded his arms and stared at James. 'No! The feckin Garda will have me up before Judge Chambers. If I lost my licence, where would you drink then? No other publican in the village would tolerate your stubbornness. Apart from that, you are killing yourself.'

Taking a cigarette in one hand, the lighter in the other, James addressed Sean.

'Judge Chambers smokes in his office and I in mine. When the Archbishop in Dublin decreed that all screened confessional boxes were to be removed ...'

'Save your bloody homilies for Mass. Anything longer than two sentences in a pub can start a row,' said Sean.

Liam waved away the suffocating smoke, gulped back the whiskey, and continued, 'The two days practising made all the difference. Going into the final competition, I'd accumulated the same number of points as Egan. For five weeks, I searched the river. Thursday two weeks ago, under the branches of the willow below the bottom fence of Casey's field, I discovered a trout as big as the one in the picture.'

'I bet that blood coursed through your veins faster than Guinness from a tap when you spied the enormous trout under Casey's willow,' said James. 'Now that I think on it, you were unbelievably fortunate to find one there. Sorry for interrupting, please continue.'

Sean leaned over the counter so as not to miss a word. 'Go on, Liam, don't leave any detail out.' He nodded and winked at James, who now sat on the edge of his stool.

'I replayed my plan to capture that trout over and over in my head. I was certain she would be mine, but that bastard, Jimmy Egan thwarted me. He ...,' Liam shook with rage, sunk the remainder of his drink, and banged his glass on the counter.

The plume of smoke hung like a halo over James's head. A cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, ash dropping all over his beard and onto the flagstone floor. 'Jesus! Liam, don't stop. What did Jimmy Egan do?'

'Grinning like a politician does after getting elected; he accosted me in the supermarket. "Liam," he said, "I brought the young fella fishing and he caught the finest wild trout that ever came out of the river, 6lbs 6oz." Where, I asked? "At the willow in Casey's field, on a worm," he replied. On a bloody worm! He caught my trout on a feckin worm.'

'The bastard,' said James.

'The bloody thieving bastard,' roared Sean.

Liam seemed surprised, almost embarrassed at their reaction. 'That's it, folks. Now that I've spat it out, I wonder why it annoyed me so much. It all seems rather childish. Forget I ever mentioned it.'

Still leaning on the counter, Sean shook his head, mumbling, 'The thieving bastard, the thieving lowlife bastard. Did you know, his wife, Emma, was my girlfriend until he stole her heart?'

Seemingly amazed at this, Liam gasped. 'You went out with Emma? In your dreams you did!'

'I feckin did, for eleven months, three days and nine hours to be precise,' said Sean, his sullen face suggested tears were not far away.

'When she had laser eye surgery, beauty lost interest in the beast,' said Liam.

'Fleck off! The miserable spectacle in front of your eyes may belie that I was a handsome youth. While you suckled your poor mother's breast, I was the most sought after stud in the parish. Ask anyone. We were in love and that's a fact. We would be married if that cur hadn't

turned up at my twenty-first in his father's Ferrari,' said Sean, banging his fist on the counter.

'Chased you away would be more like the truth,' said Liam, 'She obviously prefers thoroughbreds. I'm thirty one, so for me to be suckling, that would make you at least an old looking forty-nine.'

'Egan is a thoroughbred, thieving bollox. Take my advice; stay clear of him. I'm a mature looking forty-something year old, and will remain so for many years to come. When your own hair thins and your belly bulges, we will compare pecs.'

'No contest. I work out every day.' Liam stood, and posed as would a bodybuilder.

'So did I, so did I,' Sean shook his head, dried some glasses and turned to James for support.

Eyes closed, deep in contemplation, after an age, James blessed himself, downed a whiskey and spoke from the gospel of James P. Brennan. 'Vengeance is a dangerous pursuit. Christ was fond of fishermen, so I'm sure he will see fit to forgive us. To take another man's trout, even doing so unwittingly, is an unforgiveable and unwritten sin. The Eighth Deadly Sin is ignorance, and Jimmy Egan must be punished.'

Sean nodded. 'You're right, Father, hang the bastard. No, hanging is too good, let's cut off his manhood and feed it to the cat out back. He will be of no further use to Emma after that.'

'No! I'm not looking for revenge,' pleaded Liam. 'We all know that he is a decent skin, and few with his wealth are like that. I just needed to tell someone my tale of woe and feel the better for the telling of it. No reprisal!'

Placing a firm hand on Liam's shoulder, James spoke. 'You're wrong, Liam. Men like him are born lucky, not their fault. No matter what they touch, it turns to gold. Sure, he's one of the good ones, but men that are so blessed, sometimes need a gentle reminder that others are not so fortunate. You worked hard for that trout. It was yours and yours alone for the catching. No, we will have retribution and when I have it all figured out, I'll let you know the plan.'

'Good! Father, please don't be thinking for too long,' said Sean, rubbing his hands.

'Have I ever let you down?'

Sean scratched his belly, buying time to think, and about to reply, James interrupted him. 'Liam, you mentioned work. What do you actually do?'

'I'm a website designer, but work has been scarce due to the recession.'

'That might be advantageous. Website design is a very useful skill. Stuck in front of an impersonal computer all day explains your quiet disposition.'

Obviously aware of his personality, Liam responded with a tentative grin. ‘Were you in my boots, you would appreciate silence. My wife does the talking for me and at me, and then complains that she is talking to the proverbial wall. This wall chooses to speak when something is worth saying.’

With a nose leading his rotund face, Sean sniffed the air as though something mysterious pervaded his senses. Turning his head towards Liam, he sniffed with more intensity. ‘The silent ones are deadly.’

Ignoring the childish nonsense, Liam turned toward James, ‘James, do you fish at all these days?’

As he pondered on this question, James’s shoulders sagged.

‘No, I haven’t cast a line in years. It’s a long story,’ he said, as he glanced at his watch. ‘What the hell. The horses will still be running tomorrow. Sean, fill another two pints, toss me a packet of cigarettes and pour a drink for yourself.’

Sean emptied the ashtray and wiped the counter. ‘Father long-tale is winding up for a sermon. I know the signs. Liam, settle back, put on your seatbelt and try not to yawn.’

On hearing shouts, Sean grunted, and tended to the needs of customers in the front bar. On his return, James lit a cigarette and composed himself.

‘As sure as Christ was born the Son of God, I was born to be a fisherman, as was my father and grandfather before me. That trout in the picture was caught using my father’s rod, the fly a tying of my grandfather’s. I never kicked a football as a young lad. I fished, I tied flies, and at every opportunity, I studied my river.

‘Aged seventeen, I hunted a trout as fine as that one in the photograph. For weeks, I studied it as you did. Like you, I had my plan but disaster struck. When I arrived home late one evening, a visitor stood by the fire in the kitchen, warming his behind. It was our local priest, Father Hickey. My father turned to me, “James, it’s decided. You’re to become a Sky Pilot.” I stood there with a grin on my spotty face, thinking I would be flying aeroplanes.’

Liam glanced at Sean, both seemed puzzled.

‘What the feck is a Sky Pilot?’ said Sean.

‘That’s what I asked him, without the profanity, as confused as you are now. His answer was as unexpected as it was devastating. “Son, a Sky Pilot is a priest. Your mother has your bag packed. Tomorrow you travel to the seminary in Maynooth. I’ll miss you, Son”. I cursed the Popes that tricked mothers into believing that they would go straight to heaven if they offered up one of their sons to be a priest. Damn them all to hell.’

‘The bastards. More thieves, the world is full of them,’ said Sean as he swatted a fly with a tea towel.

‘To answer your question, ever since they sacrificed me to the priesthood, I have thought about that trout. Last thing at night, every night for the past forty-three years, I’ve hooked and landed that trout. Catch and release, three hundred and sixty five times a year. Work it out later, and don’t forget the leap years.’

Sean used his fingers as an abacus, but gave up when he reached a thumb. ‘At a rough guess, that would be close to the number of pints you drink a year.’

‘Thankfully ...’

‘Sorry to interrupt, your Holiness, tis almost the witching hour,’ said Sean, pointing to the digital clock on the back wall. ‘A cold morning, but it’s dry. I say bang on time. You?’

Liam followed James’s gaze to the clock. Twenty-seven minutes past ten, not a noteworthy time in anyone’s book.

Brennan coughed, winked at a puzzled Liam and placed a twenty Euro note on the counter. ‘Late by about six minutes but late nonetheless.’

Sean dug out a crisp, fifty Euro note hidden in the depths of his wallet, placed it alongside the twenty, and also winked at Liam. ‘Father, will you match my fifty?’

Brennan winked at Liam, grabbed his twenty and replaced it with a fifty.

‘Stop winking at me. What the hell is going on?’ said Liam.

‘A bet on a bet,’ said Sean.

Brennan clapped. ‘Well put, barman. Liam, keep your eye on the clock.’

Cloaked in silence and cigarette smoke, they stared at the illuminated display, watching the seconds roll onwards. At ten-thirty Sean roared, ‘C’mon ya fucker.’ A minute later, he groaned and watched his hard earned money fly off the counter and into Brennan’s pocket.

At ten thirty-five, the front door opened and an old man hobbled into the back bar. Wearing royal-blue paisley pyjamas and matching slippers, only his long winter coat suggested he wasn’t entirely mad. Without so much as a ‘hello’, he leaned his walking stick against the counter, took a stethoscope from his pocket, and stood wheezing in front of the priest. Brennan stood, lifted his jumper and noticing the puzzlement on Liam’s face, he smirked. The old man held it against Brennan’s chest and listened.

The stethoscope disappeared back into the pocket, five Euros dropped into Sean’s waiting hand, and in return, two glasses of whiskey were placed on the counter. Brennan grabbed a glass, the old man reached for his; both said *Sláinte* before they downed their tipples, and the old man left.

Sean poured a large brandy and handed it to Liam. ‘Drink that, me lad. You look as though you are about to collapse.’

Liam downed the brandy. ‘I am. That’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.’

Raucous laughter filled the room.

‘A bet on a bet, young man,’ said James. ‘Nine years ago I had a bad chest infection and went to old Doc Higgins, the man who just left. He warned me that if I didn’t quit the fags, I’d be dead before he retired. We placed a bet. For the past seven years, every Friday, he walks in that door at half-ten, checks that I’m still alive and pays up.’

Liam looked from to the other. ‘The pair of you are half mad.’

‘You’re half right. Sean is a nutter. Where was I? Thankfully this parish had a river. As the older priest loved an occasional trout for supper, he supported my piscatorial wandering, procured top quality fly tying materials from the hunting lads, and even made an appearance at an occasional hare coursing event. I covered for him; he covered for me. When he died, I became the elder priest.’

‘Ya sure did. Head honcho, top gun, and a right pain in the arse,’ said Sean,

‘My behaviour offended the pious soul of his young replacement, making life difficult, but every man has a weakness. When I discovered his taste in magazines, I laid down the law and spent even more time on the river than before. Just to be certain that there would be no issues, once or twice a year, I bought a few magazines, and gave them to him as a gentle reminder of who was the boss.’

‘Would they be car or football magazines?’ Sean guffawed. ‘I remember that priest, a spotty little wanker. I hear he is a Bishop now.’

James laughed. ‘I only glanced at the covers. You could be right. Some girls were lying on the bonnet of a car.’

Liam sipped his pint and gaped at James, clearly gobsmacked at the conversation and Brennan’s un priestly behaviour.

‘All the club competitions were held on a Sunday, the busiest day of the week in my trade. I had to convince the bishop that I would get more sinners in the door if the twelve o’clock Mass was switched to ten o’clock. A crate of single malt scotch secured his blessing.’

‘Father Brennan and bishops, chalk and smelly-cheese,’ muttered Sean.

‘The bloody nuns scuppered my passion.’

Sean leaned over the counter and eyeballed James. ‘What passion would that be, Father?’

‘Fleck off! Sister Margaret spotted me during one of the competitions, waddled to the palace and reported me to the bishop. His eminence threw the proverbial Bible at me and banned me from

fishing. Undeterred, I just had to be more careful. My God, this talking is thirsty work.'

After refuelling the father's glass, Sean poured one for himself, yawned and winked at Liam. 'Riveting, Father. Have a drop of that and out with the rest of the history lesson.'

'When I caught that trout in the photo, my good luck ran dry. Michael Egan, Jimmy the bastard Egan's bastard father, sent the picture to the newspaper, and the bishop threatened to send me to Dublin if I ever fished again. I would prefer an eternity in hell rather than live in Dublin. To this day, I have not wet a line.'

'Me too! The only good thing about Dublin is the road out of it.' said Liam. 'It seems we all have just cause. Jimmy will have to pay his dues.' Raising his glass, he waited for the others to do the same. 'Revenge it is!'

'Amen to that. Safe in the knowledge God is on my side, the sins of the father shall be added to those of the son. We will meet here this time next week, and as sure as Jesus died on the cross and Jimmy Egan stole Liam's trout, I will have a plan ready.'

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