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# THE LEAVING OF THOMONDGATE

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ven the promise of a bed to myself would not entice me from my hiding-place in the loft of McNamara's house.

Jim Mack, or Black Jim as he was known to his fellow fishermen, stood at the bottom of the ladder which led to the loft. "Come down", he said, "they are gone". I knew they had gone. I had kept watch out through the skylight while my father and the other members of the family were putting the furniture on the ass and cart.

All our neighbours from the Thomondgate lane had gathered to bid us farewell. The news that we had been given one of the new Corporation houses in St. Mary's Park was the cause of great jubilation in the lane and also of some good-natured envy.

From my skylight window I had observed the whole scene. I pitied the old ass: he had a dejected look about him, having stood for hours without a morsel of hay or oats. The poor animal had been borrowed from its owner, who lived outside the city, to transport our scanty furniture from the one-roomed house.

Holy pictures outnumbered the other items. Every few holy pictures my father shifted called for a last farewell visit to the pub with some of the neighbours. I had plenty of time to take stock of the total household tally: eleven religious objects, a roll of tarpaulin, a dresser, a picture of a priest on a horse giving his blessing on the battlefield to the Munster Fusiliers, two chairs and a pair of three-legged noseless china dogs. The two beds had been spirited away on the previous night for reasons of respectability.

Finally, at the end of the long afternoon, the procession was ready to take off. My mother led the ass out of the lane and my father, with a grim, determined manner, walked behind, keeping his eyes on the furniture and the six wizened children huddled between the back shafts of the cart. The unpared hooves of the ass made a dull thud on the cobbled lane. As an act of reassurance against the bleak scene, the crouched children began to wipe away a mixture of sweat and tears, drawing their sleeves from wrist to elbow across their faces.

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by Joe Malone

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As the cart rounded the top of the lane I caught sight of the brass bowl of an oil lamp wrapped in a mutton cloth. The lamp had been a wedding present given to my mother by her uncle, who had won it as a hammer thrower with the Munster Fusiliers.

Black Jim again called on me to come down from the loft. "You can stay one night more", he said, "and then I'll take you over to your new house tomorrow?" I could sense the sound of guilt in his voice.

My knees were marked and swollen from kneeling on a pile of fishing nets. I made a cautious move to the door of the loft. After knocking my head against some of the glue-pots Jim used for caulking his boat, I removed the marliné spike, which I had used as a wedge, from between the loft door and the floor.

Jim and his wife Ellen were in a sombre mood as they sat by the fire. Ellen was sipping porter from a jug. She poured some of the liquid into a cup and moved it along the table with an air of unspoken disapproval. I made a timid move forward but the cup was still out of reach when Jim looked up and propelled it closer to me with his fife, the finger holes of which he had been cleaning. (He was a musical man and was a member of St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band).

I finished the porter with one big slug, keeping an eye on Jim's movements at the same time. He slipped the fife into his inside pocket, which meant he was going to his band practice. When he walked to the door and reached for his hat my heart sank. I looked at Ellen for consolation but there was none forthcoming. She had her face buried in the enamel jug, and I could hear the dregs whistling through her lips...A cruel pretence, I thought.

But my fears were unfounded. He turned and, laying his hand on my head, said: "Come on, let's go off to band practice". When we reached St. Mary's Bandroom I ran ahead and peeped through the letterbox at the snooker tables. With a stern frown, Jim shunted me to the next door, saying that the place was only "a den for

scamps, idlers and riff-raff".

The bandroom at the best of times was not a place of gaiety. The bandsmen were serious people who took their music very much to heart. Tonight the bandroom was more solemn than usual, as word had just arrived that a former member had died in America. The bandmaster began the ritual of the dead march, with the drums draped in black to muffle the sound. Then came the highlight of the evening's practice. The base drummer raised his drumstick in anticipation, as the bandmaster stood erect and attentive. "Gentlemen", he called, "The Flowers of the Forest".

The practice ended earlier than usual. The death of the exiled drummer had put a damper on the proceedings. As we made our way home "good nights" echoed from each parting corner. At Crosbie Row Jim lifted his hat in salute to the Farrell brothers, who were going down to fish the Lower Shannon that night.

When we reached the lane Jim slowed his pace and began to stare at our empty house. "Your mother forgot to take her curtains with her", he declared. A blaze of light came from the window, as the full moon beamed dead centre on the tattered, calico curtains. The brilliant, monstrosity-like image of the window was spoiled by the faded brand name on the curtains which read: "Eclipse, Finest Flour".

As Jim lifted the latch of his door, we could hear the sounds of mice scampering and canary wings fluttering. Ellen was asleep by the fire. Jim sighed: "My God, she's been at it again." On the table was a deck of strewn cards and four cups with tea leaves clinging to their sides. Every band practice night four servant girls would conceal themselves behind the wall of St. Munchin's Church until Jim was out of sight and then they would slip into the house to have their fortunes told. They were driven by superstition and fantasy and a detestation of their humdrum twelve-hours-a-day jobs, for the miserly sum of half-a-crown per week. Jim pitched his eyes to the rafters to where the mating canaries fluttered. "They have more wit than those poor girls", his eyes seemed to say.

The morning came with the crackle of a fishing reel. Jim sat, surrounded by

multi-coloured fishing flies, in the part of the lane favoured by the sun. The tall, terraced houses surrounding the lane almost totally blocked off the light from the sun and moon. Apart from the one chink, the sun ignored the lane like a well-to-do man' skirting a ragged relation. Jim referred to this meagre shaft of sunshine as "the Bengal".

I climbed down from the bunk bed that Jim had made for me from a sandcot that had sunk near St. Thomas's Island. The kitchen looked cold and unfriendly as I gave one last look around. The canaries tucked their heads under their wings as if they sensed my gloomy mood.

Ellen had been called away to prepare a corpse. A woman had died in the terrace during the night, and the washing of bodies was too distasteful for the squeamish ladies who lived there.

I moped around the kitchen like a love-sick housemaid, shifting and shuffling the furniture. The last thing I wanted to do was to begin the painful journey to my new house. My thoughts were disturbed by the sound of Michael Dynan's club foot being dragged up the lane on the way to the church where he was to ring the bell for the first Mass. Michael was not encouraged to show himself in public, nor was he allowed to serve on the altar during Mass, even though he was well versed in Latin and Greek. Every morning he would cower in the crypt of the belltower, ring the bell and steal reluctantly out of the church after the last Gospel.

I stuffed my belongings into my schoolbag - conkers, doblers, a jew's harp and a small, red moneybox which was the same shape as the pillar boxes up town. It was a warm, windless morning, and the only activity about was the cranking of Jim's fishing reel and the cawing of jackdaws as they pulled and tugged at a few meatless backbones, the birds' feet clamped tight, beaks out of sight in the cavities, rooting.

I walked slowly over to Jim, with tears in my eyes. "Brighten up, young man, don't forget our promise", he said as he pulled on his hat. I cheered up when I saw the ring of coloured flyhooks around the rim of his hat. The bunting was not designed to attract attention. He changed his flies to suit the mood and colour of the trout streams he fished in spring and early summer. Passing a pawnbroker's house, he made a mock attempt to doff his hat. He did not approve of the money-lenders who grew fat on the poverty of the lane people.

We stopped outside the house of Alty the Greek, and looked up at the ceramic plaque over the door. Every day before Alty went down to his pitch under the swivel bridge where he ran an illegal book on the horses he would touch his forehead, lips and breast and



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rub the plaque with his tam. He would then make his way down the road behind the church. He disliked St. Munchin's so much that he would not even pass the front of the church and was never known to darken its door. On his way into the city, he would stop to collect bets from the Strand fishermen, who trusted the Greek because he was an old fisherman. Alty also taught the Strand fishermen a faster and better style of net-mending. He sought out their company when he suffered from bouts of loneliness and sang Greek songs for them with the aid of a patched-up concertina. When he drank whiskey he would abuse the clergy in Latin and Greek. He would repeat one Latin phrase over and over again: **Physica Abhorrens Ad Publicum.** He never revealed its full meaning to me but I knew it had something to do with Michael Dynan and the attitude of priests. When we entered Alty's house he removed a crucifix from around his neck. He had made the crucifix from horseshoe nails. As we left the house he muttered something in Greek.

Across the street we made our final stop on our journey at the shop of Joe the shoemaker. As we approached the door we could see Joe's bald white head through the small window-panes. When we entered, the shoemaker nodded his head, as his mouth was bulging with tacks, one protruding from his lips ready for use. He spat all the tacks on to the bench and stopped working as a gesture of courtesy to his visitors. The day-to-day conversation between Jim and Joe usually revolved around the Shannon Scheme and the great

loss suffered by the Abbey fishermen.

As the day was to be my last day in the lane the two men devoted their attention to me. "So you're going to your new house", said Joe. "I heard every house has a tap inside and a sink and a lavatory that flushes and electric light as well".

My eyes strayed to the familiar concertina hanging from the ceiling. When Alty got drunk, he would sometimes kick his concertina around the lane. Early the next morning, filled with remorse, he would hang the instrument on the cobbler's door knocker to have the bellows repaired.

When Joe finished extolling all the exotic features to be found in the new house he paused for a few seconds. He then went across the floor of his shop and took down the concertina. "I'll play a few tunes to send him on his journey", he said to Jim. We left with Joe still playing.

Up the narrow, steep hill of old Thomondgate our pace slowed. When we reached the centre of Thomond Bridge Jim lifted me up on to the parapet. He placed my fingers on the groove which legend claims was imprinted by the fingers of the Bishop's Lady. Putting his large hand over mine, he said, "This is to seal our promise. When you make your First Holy Communion I'll bring you back to the lane". He spoke no more during the remainder of the journey to St. Mary's Park.

Forlorn, I turned and looked back across the Rubicon of my lost Thomondgate.