

Extracts:

1

ALL MY TROUBLES started in the ESB.

The Electricity Supply Board. Or, depending on one's linguistic affiliations. An Bord Solantais Electris. Or something. I'm not at all sure that my Irish spelling is what it should be. Particularly for a chap who spent, in remote childhood, a month in even remoter Donegal learning the language from Native Speakers.

We lived on tomatoes.

I remember it well. Tomatoes. Breakfast, dinner and tea. Because, you see, in those far off days, there was a scheme afoot. A scheme which involved the building of glasshouses all over Donegal and suchlike deprived areas ... thereby creating an industry. And an awful lot of tomatoes.

Which nobody wanted to eat.

So. They imported us, hundreds of linguistically deprived little buggers from Dublin. To eat the tomatoes. And learn Irish.

It didn't work.

People who live in glasshouses shouldn't try to kill two birds with one stone. It was a shambles. The first week I shared my bed with four other thirteen year old boys. This was due to some administrative difficulties and did nothing to further my knowledge of Irish. Though it did broaden my mind in other ways.

So.

The ESB. And my troubles. Which started there.

I was a Clerical Officer in Head Office. This position I had held down, much in the manner of a man dealing with an epileptic, for some eight years. Over these eight years I performed many important functions for The Board, chopping and changing. As one department got tired of me I was moved to another. And, at-the time of which I write, I was in Public Relations, answering letters from cranks and people in iron lungs who were anxious about the possibility of power failure, that sort of stuff chaps on kidney machines, they have worries too.

So. I was in Public Relations. Prior to which I'd been in Debtors, negotiating with recalcitrant payers, cutting them off when they got on my nerves, other times arranging that they pay so much a week to clear their arrears. These latter times. when I felt lenient, coinciding with sexual cycles of my wife Anna. This was a vital factor in my activities. At menstruation time the lights went out. And no damn nonsense about poverty or unemployment from the improvident buggers. There's no excuse for anyone to fall behind with their ESB bills, none whatsoever. Details of schemes many and various are available for the asking, savings stamps, bank drafts, all sorts of things. Leaflets are available describing these schemes. Leaflets with little pictures of fifty pence pieces to facilitate illiterates. We think of everything in the ESB.

But people won't learn.

My days were made a misery by old age pensioners weeping on the other side of my desk. The swine. They got on my nerves. What did they CARE about me? Nothing, that's what they cared. And so, reasoning that most of them had been brought up in pre-electrification days anyway . . . well . . . it wouldn't do them much harm to go back to candleville for a while ... now would it?

I cut them off ruthlessly.

Then what happened? WELL ... the ESB decided to develop a human face. They were being pressurised by the media. Old folks were dying of the cold. Families were

Here Be Ghosts...Pages 44 to 46...the narrator meets the ghost of Patrick Pearse...

9

BEWLEY'S is a rum old place. Thin-legged waitresses weave among mahogany tables. Early morning sun dances down through stained glass windows. Chaps read The Irish Times. The waitresses have thin lips too. They know their places. They know their regular customers' faces.

But not mine.

'A large white coffee. And a couple of cherry buns, please.'

'Right you be.'

I watch her skeletal bottom walk away. And think of death.

'So, Patrick, so what happened then?'

'What happened when?' asked Patrick, looking vaguely about. 'Strange place this, eh? Why aren't all these people at work?'

'For God's sake,' I said, looking at my watch, 'it's only just after nine ...'

'Hah ... they're at work in Frankfurt, Brussels or New York right now... in fact they've done a half day's work by now. My word you're a lazy bunch ... is it any wonder ...'

'Stop being so British, Patrick.'

'Sorry. It's in my blood.'

'Ok. Tell me about the ex-nun, she fascinates me.'

'Well', he said, starting to speak and then pausing while the waitress returned with my coffee, my side plate, my knife, my little saucer of foil-wrapped butter pats, my plate of buns miscellaneous.

'Well,' he continued, when she had departed, 'well the poor woman arrived in Busarus from the airport with only the clothes she stood up in and the rest of her ticket back to the Mother House of her order in rural Monaghan. To which place she did not wish to go. However, as luck would have it she fell into conversation with a young typist from the Department of Lands who it just so happened was about to buy a ticket to Monaghan for the purpose of going home for the weekend to see her boyfriend and go dancing. Big Tom and the Mainliners were playing in the GAA hall that weekend.'

'You've a great memory for detail.'

'It's the trained mind. Can't beat the trained mind, Martin.'

'You're right there.'

'Sure I am. Don't forget I was a schoolteacher for many years in St Enda's.'

`Whatever happened to St Enda's?'

`I have no idea.'

`Aren't you interested?'

`Not particularly. A man grows out of things. Now do you want to hear the rest of the story or not?'

`Carry on', I waved my coffee cup at him. `Carry on.'

`So the ex-nun, what did she do? She sold her ticket at cut price to this young one. And they were both happy. The ex-nun had a few pounds in her pocket, the young one had saved the price of four vodkas and coke ... everyone was happy.'

`Delighted for them.'

`Mmmm. Anyhow, out of Busarus goes the ex-nun, still in her Belgian army combat jacket and blue jeans. Out she goes. Up along the quays towards Phoenix Park.'

`Why was she going there?'

`I have no idea. In any case she never reached it.'

`Oh?'

`No. You see at the Ha'penny Bridge a man lept out of the shadows and said "givus sixpence for a cuppa tea, missus".'

`Don't tell me ... it was the failed clerical student?'

`Right. Your man himself. Fallen on hard times. It's a harsh old world for a failed clerical student. It was the dogmatic theology that got him in the end.'

`Gets a lot of people, dogmatic theology.'

`Yes. Anyhow. The two of them fell into conversation and gradually realised that they had a lot in common, two waifs in an uncaring world, that sort of thing. In no time at all they had set themselves up in the Harolds Cross bedsitter, she working making sandwiches in Graham O'Sullivan's and he writing the definitive Irish novel which had been commissioned from him by The O'Brien Press, a Distinguished Publishing House.'

`An interesting little household.'

`Absolutely. Marred only by their difficulties in the sexual arena. You see they both had problems.'

`I'm not surprised.'

`Yes. Every time he attempted to approach her in bed she, imagining she was back in Africa, would scream and try to strangle him.'

`The neighbours must have loved that carry-on.'

`Yes. Anyhow, one evening she came home from work and there was your man, stark naked, covered in black shoe polish. Out he leaps, throws her to the floor, rips the flimsy fabric off and has his way with her. And, here's the strange thing, not a peep out of her. She gave as good as she got.'

`The human mind is a strange old thing.'

`Nothing stranger. Anyway. That was the solution. From then on he would black up every night.'

`Must've been expensive in shoe polish.'

`Well it was for a while. But then he bought some of that theatrical make-up that people use when doing! Al Jolson impersonations . . . found that more economical. Easier to wash off in the morning when he had to go out to Rathmines Library to do research for his definitive Irish novel ...'

I sipped my coffee thoughtfully. 'Do you,' I said, 'do you expect me to believe A WORD of this absurd anecdote?'

Patrick Pearse laughed.

And as he laughed I suddenly realised one explanation for the man's extraordinary life, extraordinary death . . . deep down, far below the depths of dreams and anger, deep down he had a place where a little boy laughed, a place where things were strange but simple, quiet but full of merry goings-on ...

Deep down he was an innocent.

An Iosag_n.

A magnificent man.

Here Be Ghosts...Pages 74 - 75...the narrator meets the ghost of Deirdre of the Sorrows, the heroine of Irish mythology. But she comes to him in the shape of a Dublin suburban teenager...

It was her. And she moved with dancing footsteps.

As if, coming along that litter-strewn pavement towards the car, it were as if her feet were remembering last year's games of hopscotch . . . games that she was just too old to be playing now. But only just.

She looked fourteen . . . but I guessed her to be an undernourished fifteen, sixteen at the most. She wore blue jeans ... painted onto her skinny legs . . . just the merest hint of female curves about her hips . . . and around her waist a belt which said:

jeans jeans.

On her top she wore a white tee-shirt which looked as if it had been washed in the other detergent. And she had no discernible breasts. If she had ... I would have noticed. I notice breasts.

Instead, in the positions in which one day no doubt the breasts would appear . . . such being the way of things . . . for which much gratitude to The Lord . . . in those positions she wore two large and shiny plastic badges, each approximately two and one quarter inches in diameter, one a garish coloured photograph of a young man whom I assumed to be in the music industry, and the other a drawing of a lunatic smiling sun with the words "Nuclear Power - No Way!"

Above then ... my initial impressions of Emily Farrell.

Hoppitty-skip, almost a child, but not quite . . . hoppittyskip, almost an adult, but not yet . . . she came closer. I now noticed that her height was in the region of five foot one and two-third inches. That her hair was blonde. That this blonde hair of hers reached, almost . . . but not quite . . . to her shoulders. And that, as she hopped and skipped, little locks and little strands of this blonde hair fell continually over her right eye.

These things I noticed.

Also . . . I saw that her fingers, the fingers that she used to brush away this hair from in front of her right eye, the fingers were very thin, very slender, very white. As was her face, white, heart-shaped, high cheekbones . . . and large blue eyes which matched almost perfectly the colour of her jeans.

Enough. No further observations were necessary. Emily Farrell was a very pretty girl. And she looked, because of grim Coolock all round us, she looked even more beautiful than the beautiful girl that she was. A flower in the wilderness does not

necessarily have to be very special. The fact that it is a flower, and it is in the wilderness, that is enough.

Hoppitty-skip, hoppitty-skip, she came closer still. And now on her feet I noticed that she wore flip-flop sandals of the type that one might buy in Penneys or Dunnes. And how her toenails were painted yellow green pink blue red . . . yellow green pink blue red. This, I must admit, this I found disturbing.

'So that's her, eh', I said to Patrick Pearse as she drew level with the bonnet of my car. So that's her. That's Emily Farrell.'

'That's her,' he agreed, 'that's Deirdre of the Sorrows.'

'Hmmm,' I murmured thoughtfully, 'you sorta don't expect to see the famous Deirdre with yellow green pink blue and red toenails.'

'Why on earth not?'

Well. To that I had no answer.

The girl drew level with my open window. She stopped, crouched down slightly, peered at me and said, in an accent that would open a can of Heinz baked beans ...

END OF EXTRACTS

Here Be Ghosts continues with the story of the affair between the girl and narrator.