

PHOTOGRAPH - NEW YORK IRISH MUSICIANS, 1937

I.

**THIRTY PAIRS OF BLACK AND WHITE EYES
LOOK STRAIGHT AT THE CAMERA.
ONLY THE POLKA-DOTTED WOMEN MANAGE A SHY SMILE.**

**ACCORDION PLAYERS AND PIPERS ARE SEATED TOWARDS THE FRONT;
FIDDLERS AND FLUTE PLAYERS STAND STIFFLY BEHIND.**

**HERE AND THERE THE ODD BANJO PLAYER.
RARER STILL THE GREY SUIT.**

**(THE LAST ROW AS USUAL CONSISTS OF THE TALLEST
BUT SOMEBODY HAS FORGOTTEN TO RAISE THE DEFINING BANNER
TO COMPENSATE: AS A RESULT, WE SEE
SHAMROCK SHAMROCK HEAD AMER HEAD CA HEAD IRI HEAD MUSI
HEAD SOC HEAD SHAMROCK SHAMROCK).**

**BY THEIR INSTRUMENTS WE KNOW THEM,
ODD SHAPES CLUTCHED TIGHT TO BREAST
OR HELD RIGIDLY IN LAP.**

SOMEBODY NOT KNOWING MIGHT THINK THEM EASILY BROKEN.

**ON THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF THE GROUP
SIT FIVE CHILDREN, NOT COMFORTABLE,
DANCERS BY THEIR OUTFITS, BLACK AND WHITE HERE;
LIKE THEIR ELDERS, UNSMILING, POLITE,**

ON THAT DAY IN 1937.

II.

**SOMEONE IN AN EFFORT TO BE HELPFUL
HAS PENCILLED NAMES ON THE BACK OF THE PICTURE.**

**DESPITE AN ARTHRITIC SCRIPT, NOT ENHANCED
BY WHAT WE HOPE ARE COFFEE (? TEA) STAINS
AND SCRAWLS OF PURPLE CRAYON
WE MANAGE TO DECIPHER WHAT'S WRITTEN.**

**HOWEVER, ON FURTHER RESEARCH,
WE FIND, NOT UNEXPECTEDLY,
THAT THE NAMES WE HAVE STRUGGLED TO FIGURE OUT
DON'T TALLY WITH THE FACES ON THE FRONT:**

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IN ROW 3 (OR IS IT 4?), FOR EXAMPLE,
WE PLAINLY COUNT 14 FACES, 14 INSTRUMENTS (SO FAR SO GOOD)
BUT ATTEMPTING TO MATCH NAMES AND FACES
WE CAN DECIPHER AS FOLLOWS:

KIERNAN, PEARSE, MCF, O'MEARA, O'S, DRISCOLL, ?, ?,
REYNOLDS, MAHONY (COUSIN), ?, PADDY T.

(DIGRESSION: THAT ? I DREAD FOR MYSELF
WHEN ANCIENT PHOTOGRAPHS OF TERRAN MUSICIANS,
PRESERVED FOR AEONS IN THE RUBBLE OF OUR BELOVED PLANET,
ARE SOMEDAY LOVINGLY EXAMINED BY SCHOLARLY ANDROIDS.)

TO SUMMARIZE OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THESE THIRTY:
THEY HAVE FACES AND THEY HAVE (IN SOME CASES) NAMES.
(IN THAT RESPECT, THEY WERE A LOT LIKE US.)
BUT THEIR IDENTITIES SEEM IMPOSSIBLE
TO ESTABLISH WITH CERTAINTY.
(IN THAT RESPECT, THEY WERE A LOT LIKE US.)

III.

MY FRIEND GILLEN HAS A GREAT-AUNT
PEGGY BY NAME, SUBWAY MOTORMAN'S WIDOW, BAYSIDE RESIDENT.
SHE ARRIVED IN THIS COUNTRY IN THE EARLY THIRTIES
FROM SOME TINY TOWNLAND IN THE WEST OF IRELAND
AND WAS NOW RETIRED FROM THE HOSPITAL JOB
SHE HAD TAKEN TO HELP HER RELAX
AFTER RAISING SIX CHILDREN.

- *AUNT PEGGY, SAID GILLEN TO REFRESH MY MEMORY,
WAS ALWAYS LIVELY, A GREAT ONE FOR THE MUSIC.
PLAYED A LITTLE HERSELF, ALWAYS HAD IT AROUND.
POOR UNCLE MICK, GOD HELP HIM, WAS A GOOD DANCER IN HIS WAY
BUT WAS BLESSED WITH THE MUSICAL ABILITIES OF A TURNIP.
TOO BAD THE KIDS ALL TOOK AFTER HIM AND NOT AUNT PEGGY.*

FORTUNATELY FOR OUR INQUIRY
AUNT PEGGY, ACCORDING TO GILLEN,
HAD LOST LITTLE OF HER MEMORY OR CHARM
ALTHOUGH NOW WELL PAST EIGHTY.

SHE SEEMED GENUINELY PLEASED TO SEE US AGAIN.
AFTER THE USUAL GREETINGS AND SMALL SCOLDINGS AND INQUIRIES

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**(SHE HAD KNOWN MY OWN MOTHER AND HER FAMILY FOR MANY YEARS)
WE INTRODUCED THE SUBJECT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH.**

**- IT'S A MARVELLOUS THING THAT YOU FOUND IT, SHE SAID.
- WE WERE LUCKY, SAID GILLEN. - A PAL OF OURS
FOUND IT IN A FLEA MARKET DOWNTOWN, AND FIGURED
THAT SINCE WE WERE MUSICIANS, WE MIGHT BE INTERESTED.
IT COST HIM A QUARTER.
WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE A LOOK?
MAYBE YOU'D RECOGNIZE SOME OF THE FACES;
WE DIDN'T SEE ANYBODY WE KNEW.**

**SHE TOOK THE PHOTOGRAPH
BUT LOOKED AT IT ONLY BRIEFLY
WITHOUT THE INTEREST WE HAD HOPED SHE'D SHOW.
WE DRANK TEA, AND NIBBLED AT SODA BREAD, AND SAID NOTHING.**

**EVENTUALLY SHE PICKED THE PHOTO UP AGAIN, AND THIS TIME
LOOKED AT IT CLOSELY FOR SEVERAL MINUTES.**

**SHE HAD PUT HER TEACUP DOWN:
WE NOTICED THEN THAT HER HAND
HAD STARTED TO TREMBLE.**

**WHEN SHE SEEMED TO BE TIRED OF LOOKING
SHE PUT THE PICTURE BACK ON THE TABLE
AND BEGAN TO RUN HER FINGERS OVER THE ROWS OF FACES
EXACTLY AS IF THEY WERE LETTERS OF BRAILLE
AND SHE WERE SIGHTLESS.
(I KNEW HER EYESIGHT WAS BETTER THAN MINE.)**

**SHE STARTED TO CRY, QUIETLY,
AS HER HAND MOVED SLOWLY FROM ONE SIDE OF THE PHOTO
TO THE OTHER. I HAD NEVER SEEN HER CRY BEFORE.
ALARMED, I LOOKED AT GILLEN.
HE SHOOK HIS HEAD SLIGHTLY AND FOR A SECOND
PUT A FINGER TO HIS LIPS.**

**... EVENTUALLY (IT SEEMED HOURS)
PEGGY'S INDEX FINGER LINGERED ON A FACE.
SHE SMILED. SOMEWHERE WAY OFF
THERE WAS THE SOUND OF A DOOR OPENING.**

SHE BEGAN TO SPEAK.

-THIS IS JOHNNY KELLY, A KERRYMAN,

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**HIS PEOPLE HAD A FARM NEAR DINGLE.
A GREATER ROGUE YOU'D NEVER WANT TO MEET.
BUT SWEET MOTHER OF GOD, COULD THAT MAN PLAY THE MELODEON.
HEAVEN HELP HIM, HE NEARLY DIED ONE COLD JANUARY NIGHT.
COMING BACK FROM A JOB IN THE BRONX,
WITH MORE THAN A DROP TAKEN, DIDN'T HE FALL INTO A SNOWBANK
SOMEWHERE ON JEROME AVENUE, UNDER THE EL.
THE COP ON THE BEAT FOUND HIM THERE IN THE MORNING,
THE AMBULANCE CAME, BUT OF COURSE, SINCE THEY COULD DETECT
NEITHER BREATH NOR PULSE NOR ANY OTHER SIGN OF LIFE,
THEY THOUGHT THAT POOR JOHNNY WAS A GONER.
SO OFF TO THE MORGUE WITH THEM, BUT I GUESS 'T WAS THE WARMTH
REVIVED OUR JOHNNY WHEN THEIR BACKS WERE TURNED
AND DOWN WITH HIM OFF THE SLAB TO ANSWER A CALL OF NATURE.
BUT SINCE HE HAD NO IDEA WHERE THE TOILET WAS
(OR, FOR THAT MATTER, WHERE HE WAS)
HE TAPPED ONE OF THE MORGUE ATTENDANTS POLITELY ON THE SHOULDER
TO ASK DIRECTIONS TO THE MEN'S ROOM
AND (AS HE SAID) TO FIND OUT
WHAT THE HELL HAD HAPPENED TO HIS MELODEON.**

**JOHNNY DIED AROUND CHRISTMAS IN 1967
WHEN HIS LIVER FINALLY GAVE OUT, GOD HELP HIM.
(I REMEMBER THE WAKE AS IF IT WERE YESTERDAY -
IT LASTED TWO DAYS UNTIL FINALLY THE UNDERTAKER
THREATENED TO CALL THE BISHOP)**

**MICK AND I WENT TO SEE POOR JOHNNY IN MONTEFIORE
ABOUT A WEEK BEFORE HE DIED.
WE TALKED ABOUT THAT NIGHT IN THE SNOW
AND LAUGHED SO HARD THE NURSES THOUGHT WE WERE ALL CRAZY
WHEN JOHNNY TOLD US IT WAS HIS FIRM BELIEF
THAT THE POOR MORGUE ATTENDANT HE HAD TAPPED SO POLITELY ON THE
SHOULDER
WAS STILL RUNNING AND YELLING
IN SOME FAR CORNER OF THE WORLD.**

**JOHNNY'S MOTHER WAS A CORK CRONIN FROM BALLYVOURNEY WAY.
YOU KNOW WHERE THAT IS, SURELY?**

**WE NODDED, TOO WEAK FROM LAUGHING TO DO MUCH ELSE.
HER HAND MOVED SLIGHTLY AND STOPPED AGAIN.**

**- THIS WOMAN, HER NAME
I FORGET IT WAS GERALDINE OR SOMETHING LIKE IT.
(GOD, IT'S HARD TO BE GETTING OLD AND LOSING YOUR MEMORY.)**

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**ANYWAY SHE WAS MARRIED TO JIMMY CARROLL'S NEPHEW TIM
JIMMY TENDED BAR AT THE STAR OF MUNSTER -
A GREAT PLACE, GONE LONG BEFORE YOUR TIME.
TIM WENT INTO THE ARMY
AND WAS KILLED IN THE PHILIPPINES, GOD REST HIM.
TERRIBLE SAD IT WAS - HE LEFT A WIFE AND TWO BABIES.**

**THIS POOR WOMAN, GERALDINE OR WHATEVER
(GOD WHY CAN'T I REMEMBER? IT HASN'T BEEN THAT LONG)
USED PLAY THE FLUTE - SHE'S HOLDING IT THERE IN THE PICTURE -
BUT THEN NEVER TOUCHED
THAT INSTRUMENT OR ANY OTHER
AFTER POOR TIM WAS KILLED.**

**ONE OF THE CHILDREN, A GIRL, I NEVER DID KNOW HER NAME,
ENTERED THE DOMINICANS WHEN SHE GOT OLDER.
LAST I HEARD SHE WAS A SCHOOL PRINCIPAL IN BAY RIDGE,
IN THE SAME PARISH WHERE [SPEAKING TO ME]
YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER
WERE MARRIED IN 1946.
YOUR MOTHER [SPEAKING TO GILLEN]
WAS BRIDESMAID. SHE WORE A LOVELY BLUE DRESS
THAT HER AUNT NELLY BROUGHT FROM IRELAND FOR HER.
THE BUTTONS WERE REAL BONE ...**

IV.

**GILLEN AND I DRANK CUP AFTER CUP
OF HOT MILKY TEA, AND LISTENED
AS AUNT PEGGY
- IN THE SWEET SOFT ACCENT SHE HAD NEVER LOST -
MINGLED TIME AND SPACE AND OTHER MINOR COMPLICATIONS
IN A WAY THAT NO SKEPTIC COULD HOPE TO UNDERSTAND.
GOD KNOWS THAT GILLEN, BEING A CIVIL SERVANT,
HASN'T MUCH IN THE WAY OF A MYSTICAL INCLINATION
BUT HE SAID MUCH LATER THAT SOMEHOW, SOME WAY,
WE HAD FOLLOWED AUNT PEGGY INTO THE PHOTOGRAPH.**

**MAYBE HE'S RIGHT; TO ME
IT WAS MORE LIKE FOLLOWING A RAINDROP
DOWN A PLANT STEM INTO THE ROOTS, AND SUB-ROOTS,
AND WHATEVER'S BELOW THEM
AND SOMETIMES THREE WAYS AT ONCE.**

**(AND ONCE OR TWICE
ARRIVING BREATHLESS AT THE END OF THE ROOT SYSTEM**

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ONLY TO FIND IT WAS THE WRONG PLANT TO START WITH:

**- AH NO, SURELY TO GOD, IS MY MIND GONE ALTOGETHER?
THAT WAS NEVER JIMMY CLEARY AT ALL, IT WAS HIS BROTHER JOE,
THE ONE WITH THE GLASS EYE WHO ET CETERA ET CETERA)**

**SHE DID NOT KNOW ALL THE FACES IN THE PHOTO.
SEVERAL ? REMAINED ?; SHE APOLOGIZED.**

**IT WAS LONG AFTER DARK WHEN WE GOT UP TO LEAVE.
(I DIDN'T REMEMBER THE LIGHTS BEING TURNED ON.)
ON THE WAY TO THE DOOR
SHE HELD EACH OF US TIGHTLY BY THE HAND.**

**- DEAR GOD, BOYS, WHAT MUSICIANS THEY WERE!
WHAT PEOPLE THEY WERE!
EACH ONE DIFFERENT, WITH HIS OWN WAYS,
BUT NO EVIL OR MEANNESS IN THE LOT OF THEM.
THERE WAS JOY AND SADNESS IN THEM
ALL AT THE SAME TIME.
THEIR MUSIC WAS LIKE THAT TOO -
SURE YOU WOULDN'T KNOW HOW TO DESCRIBE IT.
(BUT YOU BOYS PLAY THE OLD TUNES, DON'T YOU?
BLESS THE TWO OF YOU, I'D LOVE TO HEAR YOU SOMETIME.)
YOU KNOW, I OFTEN THINK OF THOSE DAYS AND THOSE PEOPLE
WHEN I SAY MY ROSARY AT BEDTIME.
GOD FORGIVE AN OLD WOMAN, THESE DAYS I'M ASLEEP
WELL BEFORE I FINISH.
BUT ONCE I'VE PRAYED FOR MY OWN, I REMEMBER THEM,
AS MANY OF THEM AS I CAN,
AND I ASK THE GOOD LORD THAT WE GET TO ENJOY
EACH OTHER'S COMPANY AGAIN.**

**SHE FELL SILENT FOR A WHILE, ARRANGING THOUGHTS
SHE WAS NOT ACCUSTOMED TO SHARING.**

**- THE WAY I SEE IT, IF THERE'S TO BE MUSIC IN HEAVEN
IT MAY AS WELL BE OURS AS ANYBODY'S.
MAYBE WE CAN ARRANGE OUR OWN, IF GOD WOULDN'T MIND -
GET A FEW OF OUR OWN LADS TOGETHER NOW AND THEN
SURE WHAT HARM WOULD THERE BE IN THAT?
AND MAYBE A BIT OF DANCING TOO, SETS AND ALL ...
I ASKED ONE OF OUR PARISH PRIESTS ABOUT THAT THE OTHER DAY
BUT HE SEEMED A LITTLE CONFUSED ABOUT WHAT I WAS ASKING.**

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HE'S A LOVELY MAN, FROM INDIA I THINK.

**SHE TOUCHED THE PHOTOGRAPH AGAIN
AND LOOKED WITH A SAD SWEET SMILE
AT THE FACES OF THOSE LONG FORGOTTEN.**

**- IT WON'T BE LONG BEFORE YOUR UNCLE MICK AND I
ARE TOGETHER LISTENING TO THEM AGAIN, SHE SAID SOFTLY.
- AND POOR JOHNNY KELLY TOO, THAT DRANK HIMSELF TO DEATH:
I DEARLY HOPE SAINT PETER
LET HIM BRING HIS MELODEON IN WITH HIM.
'TWOULDN'T BE HEAVEN FOR JOHNNY WITHOUT IT.**

**GILLEN AND I EACH MUMBLED SOMETHING AS WE TRIED TO SMILE
NEITHER OF US LOOKING AT THE OTHER.**

**... AFTER HUGS AND REGARDS AND PROMISES
SHE BEGAN SOFTLY TO CRY AGAIN
AS SHE CLOSED AND LOCKED THE DOOR BEHIND US.**

V.

**AS GILLEN AND I WAITED AT QUEENS PLAZA FOR THE TRAIN
NEITHER OF US SAID MUCH.
THEN WE BOTH REMEMBERED AT THE SAME INSTANT
THAT WE HAD LEFT THE PHOTOGRAPH AT AUNT PEGGY'S.**

**- THAT'S OKAY, GILLEN SAID.
WE DON'T NEED IT ANYMORE.**

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