

SHOW BUSINESS

An evening of keep-the-windows-open-but-let's-not-go-crazy Spring. Little noises in the trees, dampness in the grass, pubescent leaves: a great time to be alive in Boston.

Fortunately, there was little or nothing of interest on television. The Sox game had ended triumphantly, the Celtics were struggling to make up a twenty-point deficit, Kathleen was off at a bridal shower, and I was left to my own devices, which usually meant that I would stroll a few blocks over to Danny Finn's for the sake of the exercise and what used to be called "the crack" in gentler times. I grabbed a light jacket and, after leaving a note for my bride advising her as to my whereabouts (I forgot in the euphoria of the moment that she'd be staying the night in Natick), I tripped merrily out into an honest-to-God Spring evening.

It was a Wednesday evening - usually a good night - but the crowd at Danny Finn's seemed light to the point of being non-existent. There were two youngish couples sitting at one of the corner tables sharing a pitcher of what looked like margaritas, another older couple in the act of leaving, and one or two men seated at opposite ends of the bar reading newspapers. I was surprised to find that I didn't know any of them.

Even more ominously, all the regulars - Bunser, Rooskey, Warty, Kevin the Fireman, the whole lot - were missing, a situation so wondrous and strange that for a split second I thought that I had somehow wandered into the wrong pub, deceived by an intellect that had apparently begun to fail precipitously exactly on my fiftieth birthday a few weeks before. Never in the twenty years of my patronage of Danny Finn's had I ever seen more than two of the regulars absent at the same time, and even then we had all known that the absent pair, Bunser and Rooskey, had gone bear hunting in Maine, so there was no question of anyone having been raptured or otherwise mysteriously disappearing.

As I stood trying to grasp what was happening and beginning increasingly to doubt my sanity, Jimmy the bartender emerged from the basement. I had always liked Jimmy, but at that moment I loved him like a lost sailor might love a familiar lighthouse appearing out of a fogbank.

- Evening, Mr. B., said Jimmy, reaching a damp paw across the bar to shake hands. - Been a while since I've seen you. The usual?

I replied affirmatively and explained that I had been in Chicago for three weeks on business. After comparison of the respective recent weather conditions in Chicago and Boston, I brought up the delicate subject of the missing clientele.

- Missing indeed, said Jimmy shaking his head. You've been away, so of course you'd have no way of knowing what all's been going on here. You won't believe it when you hear it, Mr. B.

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Placing my shot of Jameson's carefully before me, casting a quick glance up and down the now-deserted bar, Jimmy folded his bar rag carefully, placed it in his left hip pocket, crossed his legs, and leaned one large hand on the polished mahogany. This ritual of Jimmy's was recognized by all as an unfailing sign that something of great importance was shortly to be revealed. Now he waited respectfully until I had taken my first taste of the liquor.

- You're aware of course that there's been a great revival of interest in things Irish on the part of the lads in Hollywood and elsewhere, said Jimmy. The Commitments, The Field, My Left Foot, In the Name of the Father, and a lot of others, I haven't seen the half of them. Well, I suppose it was just a matter of time before somebody figured that this bunch here in Danny Finn's were destined for stardom, because as God is my judge, the lot of them have been asked to appear in a movie that they're shooting now right here in town, down near the Common I believe. And wait till I tell you...

The phone in the back room rang. Jimmy excused himself to answer it, and I was grateful for a few quiet seconds to digest what I had just been told. The thought of Danny Finn's beloved regulars being involved in a movie - which the general population would presumably be expected to pay good money to see - was almost too much for my fading intellect to deal with, and I finished what was left in my glass in one gulp.

While I was pondering, Jimmy had returned and produced another shot so quickly that I would have bet he had it ready somewhere, knowing what the effect of the news would be on me.

When I finally returned to my senses, I naturally asked for the full details, still not entirely believing that any movie producer in his right mind would entrust his artistic and / or financial future to the likes of Danny Finn's regulars. I said as much to Jimmy.

- Right you are, Mr. B., and begod I couldn't agree with you more. I don't get to the movies much myself, what with working here and being in two bowling leagues and the night school accounting class besides, but Sheila's sister who has a job at the Star Market gets her all those crazy celebrity magazines and whacky newspapers, and I'll tell you this: if the people that are written up in them are any way typical of show business, then either they or our lads are in for a hell of a shock. As far as I'm concerned, the likes of Bunser and Warty prancing across the silver screen could well lead to the end of the movie business as we know it.

Seeking some point of reference for all this, I asked Jimmy what the movie was about. I shouldn't have bothered.

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- Well, to be honest with you, Mr. B., I get kind of a mixed picture from the lads when they sneak back here for some refreshment between scenes or acts or whatever it is, said Jimmy with a look of perplexity on his face. On the one hand, Rooskey seems to think it's a comedy, and he repeats what he thinks are all the funny lines that the leading man gets to deliver, then laughs himself into tears while the rest of us try to figure out what we missed. Bunser on the other hand is convinced that it's a serious drama...he took thirty minutes of my young life one night to detail the plot, pencil and paper and all, and by cripes by the time he was finished, the most complicated work of Shakespeare's would be an exercise in Dick and Jane and Spot by comparison. I don't consider myself a thick, but I declare to God that I couldn't make head or tail of what he was talking about, and when I told him so, he said not to worry, that it was 'terrible deep', and kept nodding his head and smiling. If he had kept the smiling and nodding up for just one or two little minutes more, I swear I would have doused him with a bottle of beer. Then of course Kevin the fireman thinks it's a love story...he's convinced himself that somehow he's going to wind up involved in a passionate love scene, and would you believe he carries around a bottle of Brut and a little thing of dental floss in his pocket just in case the director gives him the word. Once a fireman, always a fireman, I guess, but I think the whole deal will be off when the director tells Kevin he has to take off his boots before jumping into bed with anybody. On the other hand, our Warty is so afraid that he'll have to kiss somebody - unlikely as that should seem, considering that he thinks the movie is some kind of educational film on swine husbandry - that he's checked out the hours of confession at three or four parishes downtown. I believe he has the 24-hour number for the chapel on Arch Street tattooed on the back of his hand in case he bumps into an occasion of sin - preferably human - somewhere on the set.

I guess I looked every bit as confused as I felt. Jimmy laughed and shook his head.

- Sorry, Mr. B., but that's the best I can do. Talk about four actors in search of a plot! I almost feel sorry for young Tommy, I really do.

I wanted to know from Jimmy how the whole thing had started, since I couldn't begin to imagine how anything so threatening to human sanity could have happened without some word of it being leaked to the Chicago press. Naturally he was happy to supply the details.

- Do you remember a Mr. and Mrs. Doyle that used to come in here nine or ten years ago? asked Jimmy. I replied in the affirmative. Personally I didn't really know the Doyles all that well, but Mrs. Doyle and my wife had been in high school together. Then her husband Dan died somehow or another - car accident? - leaving her with no insurance and two sons, the older of whom had just started high school when the father died. I remembered that shortly after Dan Doyle's death, we had held a musical benefit at Danny Finn's to help the family out. I vaguely recalled meeting the sons at that time, but no particular memory of the meeting or of the boys came

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to mind. Mrs. Doyle - I think Joan was her first name - was a pleasant person, very quiet. Her grandparents were distantly related to some politician or another ... but if I ever knew more details than this, I had long since forgotten them.

- Yes, Joan Doyle, that was it - I couldn't recall her first name myself, said Jimmy. Anyway her oldest boy Tommy went off on a scholarship to some college in Vermont that had a number of courses in "film" or "cinema" or whatever they call movies in those circles. In any case, he did very well, went out to Hollywood and did his apprenticeship, and eventually started to make a bit of a name for himself. I used to see him mentioned once in a while in some of Sheila's magazines, and I was always pleased to see that he didn't seem to be involved in anything weird or shameful, just working hard and keeping his mouth shut. The fact that his mom had moved to California and was living nearby might have helped keep Tommy on the straight and narrow, but my own feeling is that he was basically a decent kid with a talent who was having a little fun playing pretend with somebody else's money.

I nodded as the vague memories started to take a more substantial shape.

- Anyway, continued Jimmy, I was tending bar here one night a month or so ago, and who comes in the door but Mrs. Doyle and Tommy. Naturally we were all glad to see them, and gladder still to hear how Tommy was getting on...God help him, he was dropping a lot of names! But to tell you the truth, Mr. B., if I hadn't been reading those magazines of Sheila's to pass the idle minutes sitting on the throne, I wouldn't have had any idea who Tommy was talking about. And you may rest assured that if I didn't know, then Bunser, Rooskey, Kevin and company had even less of a clue, although of course nobody let on. But it didn't matter - Tommy was one of our own, and he could have been talking about plumbing fixtures or seafood instead of Michelle Pfeiffer and Joe Pesci for all that the lads cared. They were just happy to see the Doyles again and to hear news of Tommy's progress in Hollywood. Oops ... back in a minute ...

The young couple in the corner had made a sign for Jimmy's presence. The improbable narrative resumed when he got settled again behind the bar.

Where was I? ... Oh yeah - we found out that Tommy was back in Boston for a reason, and I guess you can figure out where the story goes from here. It was comical to watch their reactions when Tommy asked them if they'd like to be in his movie. Warty, God love him - I thought he was going to cry, and you know I believe he did, although with those wrinkles and knobs he has instead of a regular human face, it was a little hard to tell. Rooskey, as you know never at a loss for words, bumbled and stammered and turned bright red, begod you'd have thought that he had been caught by the cardinal serving High Mass with his fly open. Bunser on the other hand suddenly began declaiming - I think that's the word - in a strange loud voice, a sound hard to describe ...

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According to Jimmy, it was as if Anthony Hopkins had developed a Dublin accent and a cleft palate all at the same time. Apparently this sound represented Bunser's ideal of thespian or dramatic speech, perhaps as utilized by some pantomime hero of his urchin days. Later Jimmy and the others heard Bunser talking about a Larry Oliver, whom he was obviously confusing with Sir Laurence Olivier, trying to convince his listeners that Sir Larry - as he insisted on referring to this person - was really a Dubliner from the same part of the city as himself, weren't his mother and Sir Larry's first cousins, didn't his father and uncle work in Guinness's, didn't he get his start playing an elf in Saint Imelda's Christmas show, even then he was great, et cetera et cetera.

- You know how Bunser gets wound up, said Jimmy with a smile. Anyhow since it would have been no use telling Bunser that he was mixing up two very different people, we all pretended to believe everything he said.

At this point in Jimmy's narrative, three other couples noisily entered the bar. Again I found myself not knowing them, but since they were all carrying bowling bags, I figured that they were league-mates of Jimmy's. They were indeed a cheerful friendly bunch, but when they settled in at the bar to share the latest bowling intelligence with Jimmy, I thought it might be time to head back home to "Forensic Files", maybe a sandwich, then the feathers. Easing myself politely off my stool, I waved goodnight to Jimmy and started out the door. I was sure the story of the movie would be continued at another time.

When I got home, there was a message on the machine from my boss, and it turned out that I had to make an urgent trip back to Chicago the next day. It was almost another week before I got back to Danny Finn's. On this occasion, however, to my surprise and delight, the whole gang was back in place as if they had never left. But there was something missing, or more accurately, something present - like a sense of disappointment - that shouldn't have been there. Strange to say, even Jimmy seemed affected by it, and after greetings less hearty than usual, I naturally asked what was up.

- Ah, Mr. B., it's that goddamned movie, the one the lads were in that I was telling you about last time you were here, replied Jimmy in a tone of voice that clearly indicated that he was fed up. Believe it or not, they've stopped shooting it ... looks like Tommy's studio has run out of money. The lads here were all paid, but nobody's sure what's going to happen next. It's got everybody in a blue funk, I'll tell you - I swear I hear Warty snivelling every so often. Bunser and Rooskey aren't even arguing any more. Kevin the fireman there, he just sits in the bar all day reading People magazine and saying nothing. It's amazing what one sniff of show business has done to the poor bastards.

- True for you, true for you, Jimmy, said Kevin the fireman mournfully without even looking up from his reading. - And you know, Mr. B. - welcome back, by the way -

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we all worked like lunatics on that movie. Well, not worked exactly, but we did a lot of heavy standing around and certainly a lot of sweating with those lights and all. I don't know how they stand it, although I guess if I were being paid the money the stars get, I wouldn't complain about having to sweat from time to time. It surely beats the hell out of running up and down sixty-foot ladders loaded with hoses and oxygen tanks in the middle of January, if you take my meaning. But the thing that breaks my heart is that Tommy Doyle had mentioned to me that there was a good chance for me to get a speaking part. Can you believe it? I was to replace one of the other extras who had gotten sick ... I memorized the lines, knew them cold, had a few gestures ready if Tommy needed them, and then the piggy-bank goes bust and a promising second career for yours truly is history. I'm sick over it, Mr.B., honest to God I am.

Curiosity overcame discretion, or maybe I just felt sorry for him, but in any case I asked Kevin the fireman if he'd mind delivering his lines for me. Jimmy shot me a horrified look, but I didn't catch it until too late.

A huge smile lit up Kevin the fireman's worried face. - With pleasure, Mr. B. But my chest tones are a little weak today, you know with the cold and damp and all, so you'll have to make allowances.

He then spent what seemed like two minutes clearing his throat with his hand politely cupped over his mouth. In the meantime Jimmy and I looked nervously at one another.

When at last the throat-clearing and general fidgeting had ended, Kevin the fireman rose with dignity from his stool, walked slowly into the middle of the bar, and assumed a stance that recalled engravings I had seen of Wolfe Tone or Robert Emmett - feet apart, one arm in the air, the other not quite at his side. After a last clearing of the throat, he yelled - the word is crude but, alas, accurate - in a voice that could be heard in Providence:

- I'm sorry, Madam, I have no idea how far it is to Sneem.

When the windows had stopped rattling, he unfroze from his who-dares-to-speak-of-98 pose and turned around to look at us, a triumphant smile on his face. - *There you have it*, he said proudly. *Do you want to hear it again, or should I go on to my other line?*

My failing intellect couldn't come up with a reply, but thankfully Jimmy intervened. I noticed that his voice was a little choked and that his cheeks were red, like he was having great difficulty in keeping a laugh from bursting out.

- I think we could stand to hear that again, Kevin. After all we don't often get dramatic recitations in this pub. But tell you what - this time go right into the

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second line so we get to hear that one as well.

All this blather was accompanied by a heavy wink in my direction, but sincere or not, it achieved its purpose. Kevin beamed and repeated the first line, this time adding after a brief pause:

- And you, Seán Michael, have no more sense than my ould ass here.

This second gem - including the stage Irish pronunciation of "old" - was delivered in exactly the same tone as the first, but was accompanied not by the frozen patriot pose but by such gesticulating that one could have been forgiven for thinking that the speaker was in the early stages of some serious muscular disorder. When we came to, a smiling Kevin the fireman was standing before us, his head tilted to one side like a beagle pup, practically panting for some sign of appreciation.

I was surprised to notice that for some reason my palms had suddenly gone very sweaty; Jimmy, on the other hand, seemed to be functioning normally except for the tears in his eyes.

- Bravo, Kevin Reilly, good man yourself, said Jimmy in the same choked voice. I still didn't seem to have any spare breath, so I just clapped politely. Smatterings of applause came from other spots around the bar.

- You wouldn't care to hear them again, would you? asked Kevin the fireman in all bright-eyed innocence.

- I think there's more ... more if I may say dramatic impact with hearing them just the once for now, said Jimmy with a straight face that was a miracle of self-control. *Maybe later, after we've ... absorbed them, you can share them with us again.*

As he spoke, Jimmy was trying to catch my eye, but the last thing I wanted at that moment was eye contact of any sort with somebody as dangerous as Jimmy was in those circumstances.

Not surprisingly, some of the other would-be thespians had materialized from the darker corners of the bar during Kevin the fireman's performance. However, since none of them had been given lines in the movie, we were mercifully spared any additional dramatic recitations. A general discussion of the situation followed, during which it soon became evident that each of the "actors" considered the suspension of the filming as some kind of personal affront (although of course nobody blamed Tommy Doyle, who had in fact taken the time to come around and explain to each of them what was happening).

- It's a sad and sorry thing that human beings get used like that, tossed away like old shoes no longer needed, said Bunser disgustedly. *Do they think we have no*

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feelings?

- Ah, hold a minute now, Bunser, said Rooskey. Sure you'd think you had spent thirty-five hard years working on that movie instead of two weeks. And I'd like to remind you that you made more money in that two weeks than you used to make in two dozen weeks at the gas works. And, I might add, had a lot pleasanter company ...

Warty, who had remained at the fringes of the conversation without speaking, turned away quickly at Rooskey's last words and retreated to a shadowy corner where - in confirmation of Jimmy's suspicions - he actually began sniffing, dabbing occasionally at his nose and eyes with a large blue handkerchief.

- And look at this poor soul, continued Bunser, walking over and placing his hand affectionately on Warty's shoulder. A man of his age stricken by love, torn apart by desire for ... for the unattainable. I'll grant you she was a fine girl, but Warty man, you had her by a good sixty years. Sure it would never have worked out for the two of you, not at all. Besides I don't even think she was Catholic.

- She could have converted, said Warty in a quiet sad voice. Lots of women have done that for the men they love. My own grandmother dropped the Church of Ireland like a hot rock when she met my grandfather, God rest the two of them.

- But your friend seemed to have a great feeling for that young man who played the detective, said Rooskey gently. You know, the lad with all the muscles and the blond hair. I think somebody said that they were married in real life. Surely you wouldn't want to break up a marriage? I have a feeling the church wouldn't look too kindly on that ...

- That one with the blond hair is an amadhán, not fit to tie her shoe, no more brains than Pat Leahy's cross-eyed deaf jennet at home, growled Warty through clenched gums. I don't believe for a minute they're married, barring she was forced by cruel parents into some unwholesome arrangement as a child. And anyway did you ever hear of annulments? If she wants me, then nothing will stand in our way.

He took out the handkerchief again, turned away and blew his nose. *- No, nothing, not even the church, he continued bitterly. I was flabbergasted - this from the man who hadn't missed nine o'clock Sunday Mass at St. Finbar's in thirty years!*

Jimmy's eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline. It was hard for an innocent bystander to tell if Warty was genuinely grieving, or if he was just enjoying being part of the melodrama that seemed to be coating everything in the bar - with the possible exception of Jimmy - like Karo syrup.

- Another broken heart, one for every bulb on Broadway, isn't that what George M.

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Cohan said? murmured the Bunser with what sounded like a sigh. *Ah Warty, show business is a young man's game, sure they don't need the likes of us ...*

Sentiments of this nature and worse continued to be heard as the evening went on, and the syrup level was deepening perceptibly. I listened in disbelief and honestly didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Finally, after everyone seemed to be tired of listening to everyone else wallowing in self-pity, there was an awkward, unfamiliar silence until the ever-resourceful Jimmy offered drinks all around. The offer was gratefully accepted by all hands except the utterly disconsolate Warty.

Jimmy's hospitality was timely indeed, but unfortunately it didn't take long for the boys to return to their favorite subject.

- The thing ... the thing that disgusts me most, said Rooskey after downing half a pint of Guinness without a breath, *is the falseness of the whole thing. Makeup, and costumes, and speeches - it's like little children playing pretend. Not for me, thank you - I outgrew all that foolishness a long time ago. Only that the money was good and the Doyles lovely people, I would have told Tommy what I thought of the whole caboodle early on ...*

- Hold on a minute, said Bunser putting his drink down with an emphatic little bang. *Hold on just one blessed minute. Wasn't it you, Rooskey my lad, that was telling anyone who would listen about what you called "the glories of the theater" when Tommy Doyle first hired us? If I recall, you even said something beginning with the words "If I had my life to live over..." And who was it wanted to buy the box of chocolates and the dozen roses for that little redhead in the makeup department? I don't recall you referring to her as false or shallow, even though the red hair's a wig and she's padded out like a linebacker ... you didn't half make a fool out of yourself over that one, Cindy or Candy or whatever her name was.*

Rooskey grunted something about having his eyes rudely opened, then got up and headed for the men's room still muttering.

- Well, it certainly seems that some of these amateurs just can't deal with the pressures of show business, observed Kevin the fireman to no one in particular. His earlier dramatic efforts appeared to have exhausted him, and refraining from joining in the previous discussion - except for an occasional derisive snort - he had been sitting quietly reading a newspaper. With a jolt, I noticed two things: first, Kevin's newspaper was Variety; second, Kevin had abandoned his beloved fire boots for a pair of shoes, shoes manufactured evidently from the skin of an albino lizard suffering from psoriasis. They were pointy, and quite possibly the ugliest footwear I had ever seen on a living human being.

As I looked at them in horrified fascination, my earlier breathing problems seemed to return. In the meantime I was on the point of doing permanent damage to my

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neck and my eyeballs trying by gestures to direct Jimmy's attention down to Kevin the fireman's feet.

- *Yes indeed, the world of the theater is not for everybody*, continued Kevin the fireman. I noticed that he was speaking in a voice whose tone and accent were not his own. What in Heaven's name was going on with these people? - *No doubt about it, it takes a certain ... a certain ...*

- *Je ne sais quoi?* prompted Jimmy, who on quiet nights in the bar did a lot of crossword puzzles and had once laid tiles in a French bakery on Newbury Street. *Or maybe joie de vivre?*

- *No, not that, Jimmy my jewel*, said Kevin the fireman haughtily. ("He has no idea what any of that means", whispered Jimmy to me as Kevin the fireman assumed a new pose.) - *Not that at all. But then, how could you be expected to know? What I mean is that it takes a certain I don't know what to be successful in show business. Friend Rooskey, excellent in most other respects, seems unfortunately to come up short on whatever the quality is. I myself, on the other hand, seem to have taken to it like the proverbial fish to the proverbial water.*

After another glance at the amphibian shoes, I was going to make some sort of frolicsome comment about fish and water, but I sensed that the time for levity had perhaps not arrived. Instead, I asked him what he thought of the goings-on involved in the making of the movie. That was my second mistake.

- *Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. B.*, said Kevin leaning back luxuriantly on his bar stool with his hands folded behind his head, *Tommy put one of the assistant directors in charge of us, and I really don't think much of him at all. No sense of ... of the cinema as cinema, you know? I mean, what this lad could learn from Bergman and Fellini - not to mention John Ford, God rest his soul - would be a mighty amount of learning indeed. But no, he doesn't want to hear anything from the likes of me, even though we used to watch The Quiet Man in the firehouse at least twice a week after Denny Moylan's wife gave us the VCR. "Do we really need to do this scene like this?" I ask him. "Here's the way I think it ought to go," I tell him. But I might as well be offering my suggestions to the 16-inch hydrant in front of the Masonic Temple for all the attention Mr. Junior Sub-Assistant-Director pays to me ... well, what the hell, Mr. B. - it's his career that'll suffer, not mine. Oh Jimmy, my good man, will you bring us two whiskies?*

I didn't actually hear Kevin the fireman snap his fingers, but it wouldn't have surprised me in the least. I had in all my forty-nine ... fifty years never seen such a desperate case of the inflammatory artsies. Somewhere I recalled the saying about a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. I silently thanked Heaven that there was no Mrs. Kevin Reilly to have to put up with her husband's ravings ... if there was ever a copper-bound, 100 percent fool-proof excuse for a wife to convert her

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husband to furnace slag, I thought to myself, Kevin the fireman was demonstrating it. He had survived thirty years of an honorable death-defying profession, but now the show-biz bug had infected him worst of all.

- Here's your two whiskies, your worship, said Jimmy viciously as he literally bounced two shot glasses off the bar in front of Kevin. And here's a tip - if you ever plan to refer to me as "my good man" again in your life, you'll want to make sure that your insurance is all in order before you do. And it's God's mercy on you that you didn't get to snap your fingers at me like you were going to ...

- No offense meant, Jimmy, honest to God, murmured Kevin the fireman in a contrite voice that was finally his own and not a failed attempt at Cary Grant's. I know I get a little carried away sometimes ...

- A little? Sometimes? You and the whole flippin lot of them, said Jimmy disgustedly, slapping the bar for emphasis. I think they're going to have do lobotomies on you movie stars over at Mass General one of these days soon to get you all back to the real world again. You'd all qualify for the group rate, no doubt about it.

Ignoring Jimmy's growling, Kevin the fireman now took his turn at analyzing the movie-making procedure in what could only be called excruciating detail. It was mostly a monologue, so I didn't feel I'd be missed when I headed for the gent's. Even Rooskey and Bunser seemed to be having trouble keeping their focus as Kevin droned on, especially since someone else down the bar had asked Jimmy to turn on Wheel of Fortune, the lads' favorite show. They had obviously had enough of Kevin by now and were ready for a healthy dose of Pat and Vanna.

Jimmy was in the middle of stifling a yawn when the bar door opened and Tommy Doyle came in. Beside him was one of the most gorgeous women I think I had ever seen in real life. There were greetings from all, and Tommy and the woman - he introduced her as Melissa, without a last name as if we should all have known it already - sat down at a table, where Kevin the fireman and his Beverly Hills shoes joined them. I could have been wrong, but I didn't hear Tommy ask Kevin to join them. In any event it was too late now for Tommy to say anything.

Melissa didn't say much, but with her looks and her smile, she didn't have to. I suddenly thought of Warty, and noticed with some alarm that he was staring fixedly at Melissa with his mouth open. Fortunately he was sitting behind her so she couldn't see him.

- I'm glad to hear your mother is well, Tommy, said Jimmy after the preliminaries and introductions were completed. And how goes the wonderful world of cinema?

- Good news and bad news, replied Tommy with a smile that really wasn't. Which do

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you want to hear first? he asked as the others gathered around.

- My feeling is that we're long overdue for a heavy dose of good news, right, lads? said Rooskey, and after the affirmative reply from the group, *so you may share that with us first.*

- Well, the good news is that we've finally got some additional financing, and my boss has said we can start shooting again any time we want, Tommy said. *Apparently the new backers are very impressed with what's been done so far ...*

- Did they say anything about ... about me? interrupted Kevin the fireman, again speaking in his "professional" voice, i.e. like an alien in a C-grade science fiction movie. *Because you know I've been working on my lines, I even gave a little performance for Jimmy and Mr. B. here a few minutes ago ... they were impressed.*

Jimmy and I nodded vigorously, but again avoided eye contact.

Tommy and Melissa exchanged quick but significant looks. *- Well, actually, Mr. Reilly, they didn't say anything specifically about anyone's performance,* explained Tommy. *They aren't really production people - they're more on the money side. And that's where the bad news comes in ...* He hesitated.

- Go ahead, Tommy lad, said Bunser quietly. *We're all men you're talking to, we're your friends, we can take it.*

- Well, the new backers have unlimited enthusiasm but unfortunately not unlimited funding, explained Tommy, *so they've asked us to cut expenses as much as possible. My boss seems to think that moving the location from Boston to somewhere outside the country would result in a big saving, so we're going to start packing up here tomorrow.* He paused briefly. *The other thing I haven't mentioned is the fact that our new backers aren't Americans, they're Europeans. In fact, they're from Iceland. I know, hard to believe, not exactly the movie capital of the world, but their dollars are as green as anyone's and they qualify for some kind of government grant if we finish shooting the movie there. So naturally they'd like us to move production to Reykjavik as soon as possible ...*

There was a moment of total silence, such as occurs when the sudden death of an old friend is announced.

- But my boss did say that any of you who wanted to stay with the movie were more than welcome to do so, Tommy continued as brightly as possible under the circumstances. *I told him I'd mention it to you all to see if there were any takers ...*

Looks were exchanged, and disappointment hung in the air like cheap cigar smoke.

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- *What was the name of that place you mentioned, Tommy?* finally asked Rooskey.

- *Reykjavik. It's the capital of Iceland, I think,* replied Tommy. *Or at least the biggest city up there.*

- *Iceland, Iceland ...* murmured Rooskey, rubbing his right temple as he did anytime he had to get the memory going. *Now I recall meeting a man from Connemara once a long time ago in a pub in London, Con Curtin's it might have been. He told me he and his brothers used to fish up near Iceland. He said it that for 360 days out of 365, the weather was brutal, even by Connemara standards. And he didn't have a lot of good things to say about the Eskimos, but he wouldn't go into detail. You know these Connemara men, very close-mouthed sometimes ... I got the idea that it had to do with the fact that you couldn't get a decent pint or a decent boiled potato anywhere in the country. I think he was bothered most by the fact that the Eskimos didn't seem to give a damn about it either. And he said none of them spoke either the Gaeilge or the Béarla ... that's "the Irish or the English", he translated for Melissa's benefit.*

- *I don't know a great deal about the Eskimo life-style, or much else about Iceland for that matter,* said Tommy laughing. *I'm not even sure there are any Eskimos in Iceland. Believe me, it will be a learning experience for us too. And we'll be sure to bring plenty of potatoes.*

- *Well, I'm afraid you'll have to continue your film without me,* said Rooskey with a decisive shake of the head. *There's no way that I'm going to exchange the comforts of a civilized city like Boston for the opportunity to frolic in sub-zero weather with whales and polar bears and the like. And I don't think I'd ever acquire a taste for blubber - the Connemara man told me that's the staple food up there - especially not if it tastes anything like the cod liver oil the old mother used to dose me with back home. But thanks all the same for asking.*

Tommy seemed about to say something, but I saw Melissa give his arm a little squeeze. He stayed quiet.

- *Well, I guess that leaves me out of it too,* said Kevin the fireman with a sigh. *That part about no English, that scares me. Sure you could be dying of thirst up there and never know how to ask for a pint, even if they had them, which evidently they don't ... those are terrifying thoughts. Besides, my pension check might get lost if the natives didn't know how to read the writing on the envelope ... and you can't expect the Boston F.D. to start addressing its envelopes in Icelandic just so Mr. Kevin Reilly, now resident in Reykjavik, gets his fifteen hundred dollars a month, and anyway what would I spend it on?*

As he drew his his stream-of-consciousness soliloquy to a close, Kevin the fireman cast a quick glance of farewell at his lizard shoes. - *Ah well, I guess it just wasn't*

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meant to be, he finished in a sad voice.

- Do you know for a fact, Tommy, if the illustrious Sir Larry Oliver ever made any movies in ... in ... what was the name of that place again? asked the Bunser after a few moments' reflection.

- Reykjavik, replied Tommy.

- Because if he didn't, maybe he had a reason, continued Bunser. And maybe I should know what that reason was before I go too far. My mother didn't raise a fool, you know, and sure neither did Larry Oliver's, they were cousins after all, they both were in Saint Imelda's in Inchicore, Father Dignam was the pastor, a hard man in confession he was ...

Tommy, obviously at a loss to know what in the world the Bunser was talking about, sent a meaningful look in our direction that said "Please, please help me with this." Jimmy replied with a gesture imperceptible to anyone but Tommy, who signalled back his gratitude.

- Now that you mention it, Bunser, intervened Jimmy, I think I remember reading that Larry Oliver was in Reykjavik once but hated it. He said that the natives weren't very nice to Dubliners, they made them spend the nights in igloos sleeping in mukluks. Or maybe it was the other way around. But he did say that under no circumstances would he ever go back there, and he advised all loyal and true Dublin men to avoid the place like the plague. Especially ones whose mothers were from Inchicore.

- I see, I see. Thank you, Jimmy. Well, there you have it, Tommy, said the Bunser. As much as I'd love to go with you, I'd be betraying my Dublin heritage and my bold Larry Oliver if I did. Begod my family isn't perfect, but we're none of us traitors, you understand? But lots of luck to you both - we'll all be queued up waiting to get in as soon as your fillum is showing around here. And maybe you'll come back to Boston and need us some other time.

- You never know, said Tommy with a smile looking at his watch. He and Melissa had gotten up to go when Melissa caught sight of Warty sitting behind her. She whispered a question to Tommy, nodded at his response, and went towards Warty's corner. Warty himself had not taken his eyes off her since the minute she entered the bar.

- I just wanted to thank you especially, Mr. Warty, said Melissa in a voice that sounded like humming archangels accompanied by soft flutes. It was a pleasure working with you. And I hope you don't mind ...

Whereupon Exquisite Melissa leaned over and gave Warty a big hug and kiss.

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Roskey dropped his glass on the floor, the Bunser got halfway through the sign of the cross, Kevin the fireman was in grave danger of having his eyeballs fall out, but Warty himself seemed not to realize what was happening. On the way out, Melissa said something to Tommy, Tommy said something to Jimmy, and they all chuckled. There were waves and good-byes, and five seconds later Tommy, Melissa, and Hollywood were gone, leaving several grown men in a state of near-paralysis.

If the vision of Melissa kissing Warty had overwhelmed all of us, it made the recipient of the kiss positively catatonic. He sat stone-like, apparently not breathing, not blinking his eyes, not demonstrating any of the other signs by which a living human being is distinguished from a deceased human being. Finally Kevin the fireman recovered his own senses enough to think of checking Warty's pulse, and to the relief of all, pronounced him still alive.

It was a good thing Kevin had done it when he did, Jimmy said later, because he himself was just about to pick up the phone and dial 911. He had hesitated as long as he had, Jimmy admitted shamefacedly, because he was a little concerned about the publicity: Danny Finn didn't view the idea of customers dying on his licensed premises too kindly. Never good for business when the emergency vehicles pull up in front of the pub and someone or something gets carried out.

- *You all saw that?* asked Warty when his cognitive powers had returned. *You were all witnesses?* He seemed to be doubting his own memory of what had happened.

- *We saw and witnessed, Warty,* said Jimmy. Then, in a sonorous voice: *Let it be officially recorded in Danny Finn's archives: you, Warty, were this day hugged and kissed by as beautiful a female as the good Lord has ever created.*

- *She still wants me, I know it,* said Warty in his most pathetic voice. *But they're making her go away to that Ice place to keep us apart. It's the doing of that brainless blond ox with the big muscles, the bosthoon her parents made her marry, I know that as sure as I sit here. Ah well, I suppose I'll have to confess it all soon enough ... but no matter where she is, I'll never forget her.*

- *Nor will she forget you,* said Kevin the fireman to a round of "hear hear!". He was silent for a moment, then roused himself. *Let's have a round, Jimmy, so we can drink to our short but significant careers as movie stars. And I think the time has finally arrived for me to get my show-biz shoes off and my firehouse boots back on.*

It required only a few hours for the atmosphere in Danny Finn's to return to approximately normal. As the evening wore on and more of the regulars began arriving, Tommy Doyle's good and bad news was circulated and discussed. Warty's close encounter with perfection was also noted approvingly, and his mental capacity - and, we noted, his inventiveness - certainly hadn't suffered any

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permanent impairment. The absence of a camera to document The Kiss was roundly lamented.

I remembered having to meet our niece Kathleen at the mall, but before leaving I thought to ask Jimmy what Tommy and Melissa had said to him on the way out. Jimmy laughed, and leaned over conspiratorially to Kevin the fireman and me.

- Promise you'll never tell this to Warty? We promised.

- Well, it seems as if Warty reminds Melissa very much of a grandfather of hers that she's very fond of, said Jimmy. She said that her granddad even has the same kind of wrinkles and bumps. "Like a wonderful old troll," she said. Kind of hard to believe that a grandfather looking anything like our own troll Warty could have generated a descendant as magnificent as Melissa, but that's what she said, and somebody that beautiful could never ever lie.

- And that, as far as anyone can tell, is the end of Warty's very brief career as a Hollywood sex object, said Kevin the fireman. But he doesn't have to know a thing about the troll aspect of it. Let him think whatever he likes, as long as it makes him happy. As long as one of us is happy ...

- Or miserable, said Jimmy with a laugh. You guys seems to enjoy that too.

I said my goodbyes and was headed for the door when suddenly I heard a horrified voice. *- Oh my god - I can't believe what I'm seeing!* It was Jimmy's voice, and as I turned he was covering his eyes with his hands.

- I see it too, said Kevin the fireman, who had actually turned pale.

Naturally I scurried back to see what was going on.

- We've got a big problem here, Mr. B., said Jimmy, and pointed as Kevin solemnly nodded.

There in his corner, surrounded by admirers who had followed Melissa and Tommy into the pub and had also witnessed The Embrace, was Warty. He had started signing autographs.

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