

The THREE WISE MEN of MOYVANE

What had started earlier in the day as rain had turned into heavy wet snow, whipped by a wind blowing right in from the sea. As my grandmother would have said, it was a fierce night, and the deserted streets testified to the good sense of most of Boston's residents.

It was three days before Christmas, but the throngs of late shoppers had long since headed for home. The string of bare white lightbulbs that marked the boundaries of the empty lot now identifying itself as "Fred's Christmas Trees" jangled precariously above trees that could have been huddling for warmth. There was not a sign of Fred.

I wouldn't have ventured out except for the fact that the dog, God bless him, needed walking. I was hoping for a quick excursion, but the twenty or so percent of Charlie that represented Siberian huskydom at its proudest was having such a good time in the snow that I opted to prolong the trip a bit for his sake. I also thought I would take the opportunity to drop into Danny Finn's around the corner to see which of the regulars might be out on such a night.

The wind was blowing so strongly that I had to force open the door to the pub. Charlie, no dope, scooted in first and headed right for his favorite spot near the fireplace while I wrestled with door and wind and (new discovery) icy patch on sidewalk.

Given the weather conditions, I was quite surprised to see that most of the usual stalwarts were in attendance. After greetings and the provision of refreshments for man (a shot of Bushmills) and beast (half a dozen Milk-Bones, a box of which was maintained behind the bar especially for him), we both settled down to enjoy the respite.

It appeared that our arrival had coincided with a break in a story that Kevin Reilly the fireman had been telling, which fortunately had not progressed very far. He kindly agreed to start the tale from the beginning.

- I was just telling the lads here about my grandfather Martin back in Limerick, Mr. B., explained Kevin Reilly, and about a curious experience he had as a young lad many many years ago. You might believe or not as you like, but I declare to God that the last words my grandfather spoke in this life were "It happened. It really happened."

- Your grandfather never told a lie in his life, said Denny Quill quietly but emphatically. I worked beside him in the gas company for thirty years, and not one time did I ever hear him speak a word that was not the truth.

- I knew him too of course, when we both lived in the Bronx, chimed in the Bunser

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from his end of the bar. Many the time we played football beside and against one another up in Gaelic Park. A fine decent man, God rest him, although many's the time I would wind up on my arse after coming into contact with him. A gentle man behind the fiddle, but a fierce man on the pitch altogether.

- Thank you both, said Kevin Reilly. He's many years dead now, but I'll always remember him kindly. Now on with the story.

- And perhaps a bit of a refill, Jimmy, if you wouldn't mind, said Peter Dunne. In case it's a long story, you know, I wouldn't want to interrupt Tommy here.

- My sentiments exactly, said the Bunser, and after the refills were attended to, Tommy began.

Martin Deasy, my mother's father, was as you said a upright honest man for most of his life. But he was a bit wild in his youth, fond of the drink and the girls, a fine musician who spent more time with his fiddle than with his hoe or his spade. As I understand it, he was really a gifted musician, and my grandmother liked to tell people that her husband could have been another Michael Coleman if he had put his mind to it.

But the story I'm going to tell you now took place when my grandfather was about seventeen or eighteen, growing up in a little townland called Moyvane, a farmer's son without a lot of schooling, a little wild as I said, and maybe with not as much in the way of religious sentiment as his mother would have liked. Máire Deasy was a pious lady who made no secret of the fact that she would have liked young Martin to enter the priesthood some day. In spite of her best efforts Martin seemed to be resisting fairly well, but Máire Deasy never closed her eyes at day's end without offering at least one decade of her rosary for her boy.

By around the age of eighteen, Martin and a couple of the other musical lads from the parish - Seán Reilly, called Little Seán because he stood five-three in his biggest boots, and Des Leary, called Big Des because he stood six-five in his stocking feet - had formed a little group that had become quite popular playing at ceilis and house parties and the like. Des and Seán were actually cousins, but my grandfather said that they were less like family than rivals when it came to the music and the merits of their respective instruments.

Well, the lads were doing a fair bit of travelling, and eventually they got together enough money to buy a beat-up old car to take them from job to job. There weren't a lot of cars on the roads then, especially in that part of Ireland, so the boys really

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thought that they were ready for the big time.

One December night they were on their way back to Moyvane from a hooley in Adare when the car began to act strangely, coughing and sputtering until finally it stopped and would not re-start. It was probably just out of fuel, but the boys had been drinking a bit and were in no condition to think past the fact that they'd have to walk about ten miles to reach home. With a few unkind words, they left the car to the mercy of the elements and trundled off in what they hoped was the direction of Moyvane.

My grandfather had his fiddle, and Little Seán had his box, and Big Dessie had his flute, and all three marched bravely under the chilly starlight lilting bits of tunes for one another to see if Coleman or Killoran played it such a way, or if P.J. Conlon would have done such a roll on that particular note, and in general discussing matters of interest only to Irish musicians walking ten miles homewards on a frosty December night. They were in good spirits, and thanks to Little Seán's foresight in filling a hip flask before leaving the house party, the good spirits were in them., literally and figuratively. There was fellowship and good feeling all around, marred only by the harshness of their thoughts about the accursed car that lay cold and silent alongside the boreen far behind them.

My grandfather said that it was Little Seán - who had finally managed somewhere around mile six to persuade Big Dessie to carry his accordion for him - who first noticed the light in the middle of a nearby field. Since the lads were still in unfamiliar territory, they presumed the source was a farmhouse, but as they approached they realized that there were in fact no houses for miles. The light was "soft", as my grandfather described it, and - as they all realized to their surprise later - it apparently inspired no fear in any of them in spite of their knowing that it shouldn't have been there.

- I know what I would have done, interrupted Peter Dunne from his stool. I would have turned around and run ten miles back to that car, begged its forgiveness for all the bad things I said about it, and say as many Hail Marys as would be needed to get it started. A queer light in the middle of a field? What else could it be but ... but the you-know-who?

Heads nodded silently at this reference to the supernatural, never far from the real world in Irish thinking. Outside the pub, the wind blew in vengeful gusts. You could actually hear the snow hitting the windows. Kevin Reilly took a long drink of his pint, and the others that had them did the same. He continued his tale.

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To be honest, he said, my grandfather and the other lads probably thought the same thing. But they were young bucks that didn't want to let on to each other that they were afraid. And, as I said, there seemed to be something about the situation that didn't appear threatening to any of them. In fact, after a quick consultation, they decided to climb the fence and satisfy their curiosity as to the source of the light.

My grandfather said that about a hundred yards in from the fence, they came upon a stone shed with a low roof whose back was facing the road. It was from this building that the light was radiating, but of course they could see nothing through the back wall and had to go around the front. My grandfather said too that they could clearly hear the sounds of cattle and sheep, and that they were all a bit surprised because the animals should have been asleep at that hour.

When the three lads made it around to the front of the shed, they were amazed to see a young family inside, a young lady, an older man, and a baby. The lads were so surprised that they didn't realize for many moments that the light that had attracted them did not seem to have a source..."it was just there," my grandfather used to say. "And the warmth of the place was amazing, though we saw no fire."

As dumbfounded as the three musicians were, the members of the little family appeared neither surprised nor afraid at their breathless appearance. The lady smiled, and put her finger across her lips while pointing to the sleeping baby. The husband stroked the muzzle of one of the oxen while he kept a watchful eye on mother and baby. At the far corner of the shed, an ass - hitched loosely to a small cart - fed contentedly while two kittens played around its hooves. In the cart a big dog lay sound asleep.

The lads could have been standing there for twenty seconds or twenty hours, according to my grandfather. They were conscious of nothing but the peace and beauty of the scene before them. Finally one of the sheep bleated, and the baby awoke, not crying but with a stretch and a yawn, and then a smile. He pointed at the sky, and the three lads all turned around at the same time to look. Big Dessie said later on that when he saw that huge bright star in the sky, he thought it was some kind of comet or meteor coming right at him. He nearly fainted. Little Seán kept saying "Angels...angels..." over and over again. My grandfather heard music like no music he had ever heard before, coming from everywhere and nowhere. And over everything was that beautiful soft light.

My grandfather always said that he later remembered every detail of that night as clearly as if it had happened an hour before, but the strange thing was that it was weeks before the memory came back to them in one piece, as you might say.

The solemn husband, who seemed much older than his wife, spoke to them. - You

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are musicians, he said. You have a great gift. I am a carpenter with no gift for music, except the music of the saw and the plane. Your gift comes from God. Will you share it with us?

The young lady nodded encouragement, and the baby kept watching them with his big brown eyes.

Little Seán, the boldest of the three, spoke for all. - We will of course. Just give us a minute here to tune up, thanks very much.

- Not to interrupt your lovely story, Kevin Reilly, said the Bunser interrupting the story, but is there any circumstance in this world that would scare a musician away from a chance to play?

The others laughed quietly. - I seriously doubt it, said Jimmy the bartender. Not any of the ones I know, at any rate!

Kevin Reilly had taken advantage of the interruption to drain his pint. He was ready to continue.

We're back in that strange hut with our three musicians and the family who has invited them to play. Well, soon enough cases are opened, instruments produced, haybales pressed into service as chairs, and before much longer the trio was ready to begin what would undoubtedly be the most memorable performance of its life. But at that point, according to my grandfather, the boys were all still in shock, and none of them fully realized what they were saying or doing.

- We'll start with a few jigs, said Little Seán. Lark in the Morning and the Kesh, then we'll finish with Knocknagow.

- Maybe the Cliffs of Moher would be better, suggested Big Dessie, who never allowed Little Seán the unhindered privilege of calling all the tunes. Knocknagow is ... is ... well, it has some funny sounds in it. The baby might not like it. The Cliffs of Moher, on the other hand...

- Fine, fine, said Little Seán, Cliffs of Moher it is, never get tired of that old chestnut, can never play it too many times, heh-heh ...

As my grandad said, it was never easy for Little Seán to keep his temper down, but even he seemed to realize this wasn't the time or the place to get annoyed with Big

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Dessie.

- And for heaven's sake don't use the F natural in the turn, Seán Reilly, said Big Dessie just as they were about to begin playing. You know that note really jumps out at you from the cordeen ... it's like being poked in the eye with a stick.

- A stick, is it? said Little Seán hotly, and would have gone on to bigger and better comments if one of the cows hadn't sneezed and surprised them all back into a consciousness of the scene. "Dia leat," said Big Dessie automatically, and then wondered for a second if it was right to say "God bless you!" to a cow. He'd have a chat with Father Moran about that after Mass on Sunday.

In the meantime, my poor grandfather had broken a string and was frantically trying to get its replacement in order so that the little session could begin.

At that moment the now-wakened baby - who from the smile on his face had evidently been enjoying the proceedings to that point - reached his little hand out for my grandfather's fiddle. - He laid no more than a finger on it, my grandfather used to say. One tiny finger and I declare before God that at that instant the fiddle had four whole strings. What's more, none of them ever wore down or broke for the fifty years after I played it afterwards.

My grandfather and the others swore that none of them had ever played those jigs better than they did that night. When the set was over, the solemn husband thanked them, and after a brief glance at the young lady, asked if they would play again. Little Seán asked if they wanted to hear some reels. - Play whatever is closest to your heart, said the husband as his smiling wife nodded. We hear the love in what you play; it pleases us very much.

This time it was agreed that each musician would suggest a tune. My grandfather chose Chattering Magpie, which he had just learned and was madly in love with; Big Dessie suggested Seán sa Ceo, which he always claimed a distant cousin of his had composed; Little Seán declared that they would end the set with Silver Spire.

- Seán Reilly, you're embarrassing me, said Big Dessie in a stage whisper. You know very well that I can't play that tune properly on the flute. You'd want to have a barrel six feet long to get down to those low notes in the beginning of the turn. Let's play Silver Spear instead.

- Of course, of course, said Little Seán with exaggerated politeness. We must work within the limits of our instruments, mustn't we, even if it means depriving our audience of the pleasure of hearing a truly great reel by putting another of your beloved chestnuts in its place ... ah well, no harm done. Are you ready there, Martin Deasy?

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At a nod from my grandfather, the reel set was off and running. And once again, the quality of the playing was unsurpassed.

My grandfather said that as they played, the lads became conscious of the fact that other people were now coming and kneeling before the baby, offering him gifts that sparkled and shone and filled the air with marvellous fragrance. And my grandfather said that it seemed so right, there in the middle of an Irish field on a cold December night filled with stars, that people dressed in costumes of every age and nationality should be bowing low before this simple Family, each offering his or her gift to the newborn.

Time and space were of no importance; "then" and "now", "here" and "there" were only words, sounds, no more. Martin and Seán and Dessie, jigs and reels, County Limerick: Joseph, Mary, and the Child. Yes, it was right, as right as anything since the world began.

And somewhere in that quiet place where the music begins, there came upon each of the musicians a suspicion, then a realization, and at last a certainty, and they knew for Whom they were performing.

According to my grandfather, they played for a long time to a most appreciative audience of birds, beasts, angels, and the Holy Family. Only when the Baby's eyes grew heavy did the music - their music at least - come to an end.

Their gift offered, the three musicians knelt in adoration before the sleeping Baby. As they prayed, my grandfather said, the Mother spoke for the first and only time. - There are many gifts here, she said, and we thank and bless the givers. But your gift is the finest: it comes from a place deep inside, close to the heart. It is more valuable than gold or diamonds or precious oils because it is of the same substance as the Love you see before you. Treasure this Love always, and know that you share it when you share your music.

And then there was a space of time, and a time of space, and the lads were back on the road riding in the car as if it were the thing most to be expected in the wide world. There was warmth in the car and the old engine purred like one of the cats back in the stable. They weren't even very surprised to see that they were now much closer to home than they thought. And not a word was spoken by any of them for the rest of the trip...

Nor was a word spoken in the pub at the conclusion of Kevin Reilly's story. Outside the winds and storms of the world raged and howled; in the pub all was peace.

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Charlie lay stretched before the fireplace as contentedly as if he had been the dog in the Holy Family's cart.

- And that's the story as I often heard it from my grandfather, said Kevin Reilly softly. Believe it or not as you like.

- I recall your grandfather often referring to some big change that he had undergone in his life, said Denny Quill quietly, but until now none of us ever had any idea what it was. He never talked about the details, but we were always led to believe that whatever had happened, it made him grow up overnight. I well recall him telling us that he never touched another drop of whiskey after that night...and that he started back to Mass regularly, and started seriously courting your grandmother, all around the same time. Begod, his mother must have been overjoyed ... what mother wouldn't be?

- The fact is that it changed Big Dessie's and Little Seán's lives too, as you might expect, said Kevin Reilly. - And in much the same way, so much so that the people of the town started referring to them as the Three Wise Men (which as my grandfather pointed out was closer to the truth than anyone in town realized). The fact that their performance as musicians, which had always been somewhat inconsistent in direct proportion to the amount of drink the boys had allowed themselves, had - again overnight, or so it seemed - taken on a new quality of excellence that was immediately noticed. Some people called it miraculous, while others - I hesitate to say it, but mostly other musicians - claimed to know something about fairy powers and other unsavory explanations. The lads just kept playing their music and never let on to anyone until much later on what had happened to them on that night.

- Big Dessie, Big Dessie ... The Bunser was trying to call a fact out of his personal abyss of things known and forgotten. Now that I think of it, didn't your grandfather say something about him becoming a priest, or was it Little Seán? asked the Bunser. It's been a long time since I thought about it, maybe I have the story wrong...?

- No, you're right, said Kevin Reilly. It was Little Seán that eventually became a priest, I forget now what order. He was killed in a railroad accident somewhere in Canada many years later. We never found out the details. My grandfather did know that he had stopped playing the accordion because of severe arthritis ... "I have played my last reel on earth," he said in a letter that brought tears to my grandfather's eyes. It wasn't a week later that we heard he was dead.

- And Big Dessie...what became of him? asked Peter Dunne.

- He married a girl from the next parish, and they had ten children, replied Kevin

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Reilly. *Eventually some relative of hers down in Cork passed away and left a farm to her, so they moved away to some village near Macroom. Dessie and my grandfather used to correspond regularly, but then the letters stopped, and in some roundabout musician way my grandfather heard that Dessie had passed away suddenly ... "with his flute to his lips at a session of music", as it was described to him. It wasn't long after that that my grandfather started to decline; by that time he was well into his seventies.*

- God willing we'll be together again, the three Wise Men of Moyvane, my grandfather often used to say, concluded Kevin Reilly.

- And after being given the gift of spending their time in that kind of company, who would doubt that they are together indeed? said the Bunser quietly.

- Amen, said several voices.

Then silence, and the crackling of the fire, and the noise of the storm outside. - *A white Christmas in Boston for sure, Mr. B., said Jimmy the bartender as I rose to go. And there will be no happier doggie in the Boston area than your man Charlie the Snow-dog there.*

Charlie, still stretched in front of the fireplace, lifted his sleepy head and gave Jimmy a look that plainly said "Not tonight." But it was without a doubt time to head out.

- Merry Christmas! called the regulars to each other, shaking hands as they began to prepare themselves for the challenge of the trip back into the world. God bless! Happy New Year!

And so I say to all you who read this little story.

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- Christmas 1996