

THE MAN ON SEAMUS' BUS

"Now, you've probably noticed that the Shannon Shore Road bus from Dublin doesn't stop anywhere but here at Callaghan's. Not that this is an official stop, mind you. But, then, if we were to use the official stop, it would mean a lot of walking and even missing the bus occasionally. One never knows when it comes by, even if they say there's a schedule. What with the roads, the stops and all, a man could catch a cold waiting out in the open air. Here at Callaghan's one's sure. Even if one misses it, at least one can't say that he missed the bus for no purpose. After all, what's one goin' to do elsewhere that one can't do here?"

"Take yourself, for example. You said you stopped by 'cause you were curious about the town. Fine. And here you are, midst fine people. Supposing, though, the bus had dropped you off at the official place. How would you ever find Callaghan's? Besides, how would you ever leave this afternoon, as you said you will, if you were left somewhere else and didn't know that it's here that the bus really stops?"

The man was about to answer...

"Oh, sure," the Irishman went on. "You'd probably find a way. Young fellows tend to feel they can resolve anything. Like the young ones in this town. Few o' them ever stay forever, even if you notice that most o' us 'round here ain't no spring chickens and must ha' been 'round these parts for as long as time. Truth is there's always some young fellow 'round here who feels he has to leave because there's work elsewhere. Or because he feels the need to get married. That's what happens to most. Somehow there's something about America, Canada, Australia, and even New Zealand that says young fellows who leave here must get married. If they stay, the feelin' never seems to hit them. Some say, it's the water. But I can't believe that. Take me, for example. I come from a long line of bachelors. All my uncles, as far as I know, were bachelors - except for the ones who emigrated. Even the women don't seem content being just aunts. As soon as the eldest sister marries, sure enough, most take off for parts unknown. Why, if it wasn't for their good Catholic trainin', thank the Almighty, most would probably even settle for livin' with someone in sin and give up their honor. Thank God for the Mother Church and its insistence that there's only one way to lose virginity. But still they leave as if there was no work around here, which there is, even when there's little to show for it - as seems to be the the case most days.

"So no one was surprised when the bus stopped up front and the tall chap got out. We looked through the window as he dragged his brown suitcase. 'Thanks a lot, Seamus,' says he. One could hear the driver say something, although no one could make out what it was. The motor was still goin'. Seamus always kept it on, just in case. One day he made the mistake of stoppin' it and it was almost a whole day before he could get the bus goin' again. You should ha' seen how we all chipped tryin' to hand crank it. 'No more,' said Seamus. 'The company can well afford the petrol. From now on, we turn on the motor in the terminal and we turn it off in the terminal.' And it's been that way ever since.

Seamus MacNeil is a good man. Even if he knows there's little to do, and a lot of time to do it in, he's not the type who'd inconvenience people unnecessarily by gettin' them to work.

"Not that Seamus is lazy, mind you. He got off the bus, just like the tall chap in the black suit and the white shirt without collar. 'Men,' says he as he and the stranger entered. 'Meet Father Michael Fitzgerald.'"

The narrator paused and took a long sip from his drink. He then looked to the bartender and signaled for a refill. The man behind the bar picked up the glass and placed it under the counter. He reached for a clean one amongst those on a round tray at the end of the bar. "You've had this'ne long enough," He said. "Let me get you a clean one."

"And bring me a fresh one, too," said the man who up until then had not done very much except listen. He had an American accent.

"Had the wind been blowin', we'd ha' been knocked over. The priest was in his early twenties and, as far as we knew, no one had yet notified the authorities about Father Flaherty's death. Why, with the fight with Squire Deneher about who was to pay for the funeral and all that, no one had bothered to bury the good priest. Not that we were in a hurry, mind you. Not until we had a new priest at St. Margaret's who could send him away with all proprieties a good man deserves, anyway. The good father was in storage in the church basement, where we knew he wouldn't fade too rapidly. 't was a game of wills, I tell you, the parish on one side, the Squire on the other saying we had let him down and had cost him fifty pounds. We still don't know what made him that way.

"In any case, we're all jolted out of our wits as Seamus and the stranger stood by the open door. The boy couldn't ha'been more than twenty, if he was a day. 'Father Fitzgerald,' someone finally says. 'Who sent for him?'

"'No one,' says Seamus. 'He's just comin' home on his own, that's all. Tell'em, Father.'

"My God, he was an American, just like you, my friend. It ain't often we get Americans 'round here, although some do come by on occasion, just as you did. Seamus'as been droppin' off the likes of you and takin' them on for years. At no time prior has he ever told anyone that the visitor he'd brought had also come home."

"That's just the way it is," the bartender added. "They come and go, and we ne'hear from them again. It's as if out there there's a world that engulfs people leavin' us as the only survivors. Ain't it?"

"And that's what made Seamus' announcement the more interestin'. No one had ever seen a young priest leave this parish. It was only natural we'd not expect one back. But there he was as live as sin, and when he said 'Hi' and waved to us, we knew for certain that someone was pullin' our leg.

""t ain't funny to joke about these things, Seamus,' says I. 'But it ain't no joke,' he says. 'Father Michael Fitzgerald is coming home, if only to visit, but comin' home nevertheless.'

"There'd once been a Fitzgerald in town. A school teacher who left when he was suspect of having English-leaning tendencies. Always insisting that there'd be little future in Ireland if we attempted to dump the English altogether. That Ireland couldn't stand alone and ignore its past while searchin' for the future. Although Irish, one could never know where he stood exactly. Married O'Connell's daughter, when the old man owned this pub before Callaghan, bless his dear departed soul. Right?" Ev'ryone agreed. Even the man sat drinking and smoking his unlit pipe shook his head approvingly.

"Patrick O'Connell was my grandfather,' says the young man. 'Will Fitzgerald was my father. As far as my mother tells me, I was conceived upstairs, right over this bar. Now you know what Seamus means when he says I'm coming home.'

"Ev'rybody stopped drinkin' or talkin'. Even Callaghan, who's always cleanin' somethin' or other, stopped movin'. For a moment, I, myself, felt as if O'Connell's soul had returned and stood before us. A different face, a different voice, a different smile, a different world, but O'Connell ne'ertheless. One could've always counted on O'Connell. But as a priest?

""t was then that someone remembered Father Flaherty. Although by that time the Squire had already agreed to pay for the casket and the wake, the good father was still lying around waiting for his final restin' place. 'Would Father Fitzgerald care to do the honor?'

""I'd be happy to,' he says. 'Father Flaherty married my parents. It's least I can do to thank him.'

""That calls for a round on the house,' says Callaghan. 'Bout time,' someone shouts back. Then someone remembers that the good father had died on St. Margaret's Day and that for as long as anyone recalled, he'd always taken the statue down to the water's edge as if the saint had to bless the sea. Why not bring the casket and the statue down at the same time and make sure that the good father didn't leave this world with his work unfinished? After all, he would ha' been there the day he died, had he not been surprised otherwise.

"Thus it was decided by all that Father Fitzgerald would officiate at the saint's journey while Father Flaherty witnessed from his nearby casket."

"You know, Yank," Callaghan interrupted. "We Irish are a strange people. We love our land, and still we leave it constantly never to see it again. We trace our roots to people who came from across the seas and yet what seems dominate our lives is the land we occupy. When the land can't produce, or the spud seedlings drown in the undrained ground, it's to the sea we turn for food. On the other hand, although we'll fight forever for our land, we seem to ignore the sea as if it belonged to everyone. We never fight for it. Chances are you've ne'er heard of an Irish navy, for example. But, then, we've never had none. For some reason, if the moon were to fall into the sea a few miles from here, we'd probably take the first foreign boat we could find, as if we were all St. Brendan trying to be the first people there. And, even though we wouldn't come back, our hearts would remain with this land. There've often been times when I've gone upstairs late at night, to the same room where Father Fitzgerald says he was conceived in, and look out towards the sea. Once in a while, while the stars and the moon are sleeping, I can spot some lights in the afar as if some ship were passing by - perhaps taking our people somewhere so that we may survive here. The sea, it seems, is the only thing that Ireland has that takes from it in order to help it survive. You can just imagine, therefore, why it's necessary for us in this parish to see that St. Margaret comes out of her church once a year to look at the sea. It's our way to say thanks - not because we're crazy, or Irish, but because that's how it must be. Saint Margaret, we've been told, has always been kind to those who survive from the sea." The man behind the bar stopped talking. "You've got the soul of a poet, Callaghan," someone shouted. "See what years in an English jail can do for you. Perhaps that's why there are so many poets in Ireland - the years we spent penned in by English did it." "It's not poetry, Patrick O'Flynn. It's reality," Callaghan replied. "And who says poetry can't be real?" Flynn asked. The American waited for Callaghan's reply when he suddenly heard the voice of the man standing next to him. "Well, 'tis as I was sayin'. Father Fitzgerald got as excited as the rest of us. He grabbed for his suitcase and, as if he had known the town all along, headed towards the church. Once there, he asked to see Father Flaherty who was sleeping peacefully in the closed casket. We opened it. The old man looked natural as if his last moment had not been a pain in his chest. Father Fitzgerald asked that we bring the casket upstairs. By that time, four of the men were already takin' down the statue, ready to start the procession to the seaside. Outside, the parish women had already gathered, dressed in their best finery as if they had known all along what the day was bringin'. Four of the lads then placed the statue on its processional platform and with all the solemnity of the occasion started marchin' slowly, so no one would miss a step. We followed them with the casket. Someone held the church door open, a it had always been done, to let us pass. Once outside, Father Fitzgerald took the lead and, with the whole parish behind, headed towards the openin' on the retainin' wall that separated the road from the rocky shore. It was as if he'd been doin' it all his life. "For once nobody fell on the more than fifty yards of rocks that lie between the retainin' wall and the sea as we moved to the water's edge. The sun shone and the waves flowed as if they were dancin'. When we could go no further, we laid the statue and the casket down. Father Fitzgerald readied to start his prayers, when suddenly we could see the sea rise in the near horizon. 'Tis the tides of August,' someone shouted. 'The tides of August.' 'Tides of August. Nothing. In July?' Someone asked in a loud panic-filled voice. "Eversince I was a boy, I'd always heard my mother tell to beware of the tides of August. The seas would be calm, she'd say, when without warnin', the waves would rise higher than the trees,

respectin' nothin' in their path. They were said to be brought by the currents that started somewhere in the Americas as a revenge for the white man's discovery of that continent and against all the sins that had been committed against the savages there. Granted God had allowed men to bring them to the true faith, but in doin' it they'd made many mistakes - like showing the way for protestants, for example. "The gigantic waves started gettin' closer when someone shouted we should run for our lives - which we did, leavin' the statue and the casket behind. Even those who tripped on the rocks had no trouble gettin' up and makin' it over the roadside wall. The waves, for their part, kept rollin' towards land. The first hit the wall with great force, and its spray showered all of us with a misty warmth. Others followed while we crouched in fear and prayer on the roadside. Suddenly we could see that everything had stopped and we could hear the sea water recede through the cracks between the rocks, soundin' like a spring stream in the salmon season. One by one, we got up and moved towards the sea once again. "For some unexplainable reason, the statue was still standin' as if untouched. The casket and its contents, on the other hand, were gone. The sea had calmed down. For a moment no one seemed to know what to say until someone saw Father Fitzgerald kneel where the casket had been. He stayed put for a time, his eyes tear filled as he looked to the sky. His arms were open as if he were crucified. Moments later, his body bent down towards the rocks and, as his mouth reached the first, he kissed it as if receivin' the Lord into his body. He then raised himself and, after makin' the sign of the cross, looked at us as if he seein' us all individually, and with a voice that rang of happiness said: 'God's will's been done once more. We're home, as always.'" The pub was suddenly still and remained that way until the roar of a motor was heard up the road. Seamus had returned as he had been doing for years. The American at the bar reached in his pocket for a one-pound note and prepared to finish his drink, as he handed the bill to Callaghan. He then turned towards the Irishman next to him, who was still quiet - looking right past him.

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