

The Night the Babe Died

by Vince Barry

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WHY WE LIKE IT:

The baroque glory of this sumptuous Irish prose blew us from here to Blarney. Listen for Joyce, Doyle and Canadian icon Michael Crummey. But the voice is Barry's own with an idiosyncratic energy that swells in the mind's ear with riotous colour. We just can't get enough of this serendipitous syncopation!

Delivered in a low gruff voice, the *bean an tí*'s first admonition, that I can frame in the blank of memory, about the impropriety of inquiring into the curved line of Joe Kelly's back, came when I was but a "chiseler" of ten and Joe closer, in mind's eye, to five than four times that.

"Not an unseemly ward 'bout such things or I'll brain yer!" So said the phlegmatic Irish "woman of the house," brushing a cloud of thick black hair out of her quick chatoyant eyes. "Dat goes as well," she added, in a voice as thick as cabbage and potatoes soup, "for 'is whistlin' esses."

It probably came earlier, the warning I mean, for Joe was a familiar presence at the Faheys' nightly ritual, and I by then had been five years relocated, to the US, during the early days of the bombings of England's urban centers. Operation Pied Piper it was called—the relocation, not the bombings. But *fadó*, that was long ago, as the Irish say, and none of that matters. Well, perhaps, “Bye-bye, Mummy,” that, . . . and the custodian’s “Bob’s your uncle!” cast like a life support to us “poppets” and “lambs”; and his helmet, of course, that. . . .

The evacuation officially ended in 1946, the same year I was officially declared “orphaned,” and two years before Mamie’s aforesaid peremptory edict, furnished with, as recovered from one of memory’s hiding places, a pudgy fist shake: “Not a ward!”

No matter its precise inaugural, the thing is that the threat always came as the Faheys, my “host family,” were poised to observe their nightly ritual,—“service,” of late I’ve come to call it—for it was a bet certain that the wheezy, effaced-looking little man, with deep-set hooded eyes, one blue one brown, one cool one harried, would “just pop in,” for he always did for as long as anyone could remember, for as long as the solid oak duel chime mantel clock struck nine, the hour that the Faheys took their “cake-an’-tay” as regular as clockwork. . . . But

then, in the mauve-lemon light of the shortening dusk of the poet's "odd uneven time," everything changed—forever for me.

A happy hazard is how Mamie took Joe's timely materializations, whereas it well consternated her counterpart, the *fear an tí*. The "man of the house," that being Mikey, viewed it more than mere happenstance, and once umbrageously so noted, and right in the middle, it was, of the Faheys' measuring out their lives with tea bags.

And didn't "his nibs"—Mamie's appellation—thereafter tote along his own pekoe, a single Lipton, which, with a shade of cabotinage, he would produce—presto! from the pocket of his threadbare heather grey cardigan, invariably kindling from Mamie something of the bright kind, "Sure that's somethin' dat de auld redhead 'imself might do!" She meant, of course, Arthur Godfrey, the ukulele shredding, freckle-faced redhead with the contagious chuckle who liked ribbing sponsors of his wildly popular morning radio show "Arthur Godfrey Time." To wit, of the jingoistic Holy Ghost of salesmen, a folksy "bare-ass-prin" for, y'know, Bayer Aspirin. ("Imagine 'imself sayin' a tin' loike dat on de wireless. What gran' *blas* on 'is tongue!") Or of his "soggy mess" for a tea bag

after brewing—Lipton, o' course, whose "brisk flavor" "God" himself vouchsafed. ("Imagine, can yer? whaaat de Lipton people are tinkin'")

Mamie idolized Godfrey as much as the "Old Redhead" did Curtis "Bombs Away" Lemay, the general with the perpetually airborne B-52s pregnant with nukes he lusted to drop on China, and later on Cuba and North Vietnam. But by then—y'know, 'bout when Sterling Hayden chillingly portrayed the cigar-chomping head of SAC in *Dr. Strangelove*?—well, they were long in the clay—Joe, Mamie, Mikey. But back then, topside this earth, they were playin' their roles, as all of us always, which meant, for his part, Mikey would receive Joe's sibilant ripostes under a beetling frown and long, sheep-like face, as he cut into a Dugan's coffeeecake. Mikey—

(The Faheys, in passing, bought no baked goods—cupcakes, crumb cakes, French crullers—none, other than Dugan's, delivered. And Sheffield milk, in a half pint bottle with cream on top, and eggs from a man with a head like—well, it was, truly, amazingly, like a large, brown egg lying on its side, drawing vigorously—if y'can imagine such an egg—on a mahogany meerschaum calabash pipe clamped between its teeth while it spoke, short and clipped, making the thin cerise scar on its khaki jowl all aquiver. Such a Seuss-like egg! . . . I've often

wondered where the egg man got that scar. I have. Oh well, worse could be wondered of a man—say, of our present President Numpty Postiche, for instance.)

— Anyway, Mikey, I was about to say, would neither smile nor twitch during his preternatural dismembering of the nutty ring lest it encourage Joe. Only the suggestion of a sneer would he allow, shot sideward from the corners of the mouth of a pallbearer's face. Mamie, on her side, would, naturally, slip me like a thermometer a stormy look lest I dare inquire of "such things," one of many unspecified "suches," which, rather like fate, I best not meddle with inquisitively. But of those another time. "It al' depends," to borrow Mamie's patented conversation plugger, which she remonstrated with anyone coopting.

His kyphosis aside no one knew much about JK, as we kids called him, save Joe lived near 8th and Garden in a room above McTeague's dental parlors, was partial to cardigans, and, of course, had an uncanny sense of timing. And since JK was one of those dry, blessed souls who live and die in Epicurean anonymity, stirring no more curiosity in others than does a dog's upraised leg against a mid-block johnny pump, he would occupy no place in my troubled heart's mind but for that late August evening, when, in the mauve and violet light of the slowly ebbing day, with the air redolent of rich roasting coffee beans wafting from the plant along the

waterfront from 10th to 12th,— Maxwell House, that being, the coffee that Katrin and Lars, of Mamie's favorite program "I Remember Mama," imbibed in "to the very last drop,"— this pursy, undersized, lamentable ruin of a man with lank, pomatumed hair limped down Garden toward 9th with—well, "sylphlike" comes to mind; and, lo these many years, "cleanly stenciled," of brow," and "firmly moulded," of lips; . . . not to say, of respiration, "inflection." But of all, "lime green." Yes, of all, that has stuck with me, that thigh-high gossamer dress, lime green it was— not that, beyond that, do not, certainly, "right elbow," his, and "hand tucked," hers, "snugly," stick. Certainly. And, oh yes, sandals, hers, forest-green patent leather; and, of course, that thick-heeled black boot of his, just like today's fashion rage—can you imagine?— Funtasma Monster or Demonia's cutting-edge aesthetic Men's Stack 201 Vegan? . . . and, naturally, the excited motion of his hump-stretched sweater fading into the glaucous gloaming under a waxing gibbous moon. That.

Thus my answer to the question if ever asked: What stokes your surges of loneliness? That does, in straggling elfin memory, and the dialogue that ensued.

First, Joe Kelly,—aka "his nibs," "JK," "hunchback"—by any other name our worthy, the pale little man with scraggy legs speaks, as he and his arresting, sandy-

haired belle pass the rout of striplings idling on the eight-step stoop of the Fahey brownstone on this night of *draiocht*, of enchantment.

“Gents,” he goes crisply in the close warm air.

Sorry, but, “That’s all folks!” as Porky would put it.

I mean, of course, that’s all he utters, . . . all for me he *has* to utter, evenly, unhurriedly, forever, for as long as I dree my weird with tense melancholy. Out the corner of his pocket mouth it was, is, by way of heavy, high-handed greeting to brush from the brood’s vaporous minds the deathwatch that has drawn them like crepuscular birds in search of carrion to the russet roost that is 837 Garden, between 8th and 9th.

Then more dialogue, this from the preceding urchins and lads, bathed, be they, in the soothing ovated light of a cast iron lamppost, some playing stoop ball, others idling on fissured brownstone steps, still, mind you, blocks away the New World’s version of the “The Old Rose Tree.”

“D’ja see that?” from one of the assemblage, in hushed, nearly reverential tones; then from a second, as of all imponderables, another question: “What *was*

that?" "Wh-wh-wow!" a third stutters, as the improbable pair fades into the shades of evening.

Then from Mamie, who, "sudden as conscience," appears with, as her wont, broom in hand: "Waaat ye birds chirpin' aboyt?"

"JK just went by."

"Well stop de presses, why don't yer?" The stick, like a self-propelled hurley, rakes the sidewalk fronting the stoop.

"With a girl" is muttered.

Ah, but doesn't that prick up the *bean an ti'*'s ears and still her matronly sweeping. "A gearl?" she goes, then, "Waaat da yer mean—'a gearl'?"

Further fleshing out the surges of loneliness, the following feverish chittering: "He was with a girl," then, "A *woman* she was," then, "A *young woman*." Then a hail from the gibbering busy faces:

"Half his age!"

"At least!"

"A blonde."

"And good lookin'!"

"A knockout!"

"Like Judy Garland!"

“Judy Garland’s a redhead!” That from a derisive Jimmy Doyle,

“Ginger Rogers is watcha mean.”

Face bent to walk, Mamie lets the youths twitter on in awe-stricken whispers before sedulous curiosity jerks her head upward. “An’ ye say dey were—?”

“Hand in elbow,” Jimmy Doyle bravely breaks in.

“Ah, in ’s boney elbow, wus it,” she goes, “’er podgy ’an’?”

A testy Mamie leaves the nonplussed boys to their pubertal susurruus and, with an attentive poise of her cernuous head, leans forward and braces her chin atop her hands, which rest on the knob of the thick broom. Then she casts, she does, albeit, mind you, in clouded memory, a yellowish green eye at Luigi’s across the street, where the eponymous, lugubrious proprietor of the step-down candy store where *the fear an tí* sends me on Saturday nights to buy his Gillette Blue Blades, two for a dime, sits atop the landing, right arm slung idly across shiny black rail, bald head making repeated bobbing movements like a nodder or wobbler, only sadly, solemnly. There is about his mild and thoughtful appearance a —what? an eremite, you could say, or, certainly, the mien of a kindly jinn.

Then, on a sudden, Mamie whips her head backward and, very much the hawkshaw, snaps, “‘S in ‘ers?”

“Hers in his,” comes a winged response.

“Ye mean she wus s’portin’ ‘imself loike”—then rapidly—“a niece? a nurse? a friend of the family?”

“Not exactly,” comes a voice from the upper steps.

““Not exactly?”” returns an envenomed Mamie before rescuing the the kinder, gentler *bean n tí* : “Whaddya mean, lad, ‘not exactly’?” then clarifying, “She was either s’portin’ ‘imself or not s’portin’ ‘imself—so which would it be bein’?”

“Well, it all depends,” temporizes the voice.

““It al’ depends!”” Mamie thunders, the broom turned lightning bolt in the hand an angry god.

“Well, it was more *cozy* like,” comes an adenoidal reply that gathers a quick consensus, before a croaking, “Yeah, they were real chummy,” then a resounding chorus of, “Yeah, *real* chummy!”

There follow diapasons of sniggering that vie in the violet light with the beckoning calliopean chime of “Turkey in the Straw.”

It is, of course, one of Henry Burt, Jr's, pristine white ice cream trucks heralding the trailing Vincenzo's pushcart of Italian ices, the lads' favorite. They stir, do they, the chattering flock, to the corner of Garden and 9th, leaving Mamie to mutter into her broom handle: "Waaat fetchin' young thing 'alf ' 'is age wud Joe Kelly be p'radin' down Garden Street loike Fred Astaire in de Easter Parade? Dat's de quesshun."

I, for my part, was pondering a different question, not about Easter Sunday, but a deep, moral one: whether the lady in lime was dressed immodestly or merely somewhat so. Or, more exactly, as I resurrect memory: how to know? That was it, the question that occupied me then, the deepest—what? epistemological question actually, that, I nakedly admit, has ever occupied me, the one on which it all depends. How to say what is so?

I'd recently learned, y'see, in catechism class it was, from Sister Sylvia, that immodest dress could be an "occasion of sin," and I was earnestly trying to sort out the modest from the not. . . .

Well, "immodest," I was in fine inclined to say, of the lady in lime; dressed immodestly she was, judging from the older boys' reactions. The lady in lime was,

in brief, an occasion of sin, I decided, to the acrose jingle-jangle of achromatic minstrelsy.

“Here,” Mamie goes fast, before memory collapses her words like a closeout wave,— fishing, she does, a pocketful of change out of her wavy checker fully lined seed sack apron with side pocket, her second favorite after the pinafore with tiny red and white checks,— then, abstractedly, her voice dropped to a soft murmur, “get yerself a poke.”

The coins fall through unextended, uneager hands and tinkle at sneakered feet like a sanctus bell, as Mikey emerges from the basement, his face under rich weathering, his eyes full of timorous vigilance. With great gravity he shuffles up the three greige concrete steps to the sidewalk, holding like a coin or wafer or plucked butterfly between thumb and forefinger of right hand a lighted Chesterfield, which, at the Old Redhead’s urging, he used to buy by the carton, or I did for him at Luigi’s.

The ascent braved, Mikey rests left hand over heart and pulls deeply on the butt. Then, in a husky whisper, one so thick and solemn as to freeze me still in any since then opalescent cloud-breaching dusked light, he intones, “De Babe is gone.”

“Well, waaat do ye nu?” Mamie responds.

“Not dat it wasn’t expected, I’ll grant yer dat.”

Rings of smoke frame his ruddy face, that looks to—what? the “rusted spring of memory,” is it?— a Rembrandt self-portrait, *circa* 1659, with flat cap for beret. “But still,” he broods, “whaen it cumz, ’tis a brutal tin’... a brutal tin.”

From Mamie, lost in thought, quietly, as if to herself, “Who wud ’av tart it—such a tin?”

And, antiphonally, from Mikey, “”Tis been al’ over de bars for weeks.”

Then goes Mamie, in a flat low voice and a slight rise of color, “”is nibs ’as got ’imself a lady friend,” adding, “the bloody popinjay,—’e’s got ’imself a real *dathúil*,” and then, from resolute, compressed lips, the afterthought, “accordin’ ter de lads.”

Thin lines of smoke stream from Mikey’s nostrils like incense from a censor as he boulders the eight stoop steps to the tinted upper landing, where, breathing hard, mouth cupped with deep-veined, shaking hands, his eyes shuttered and brows brooding, the thick and squat *soi-disant* town crier makes it known to all of Garden Street that the Sultan of Swat has—well,

““E’s gone— de Babe’s gone!” and again the same, and the same again.

There, that's it, in memory's camera obscura. Except, of course, for the lads, holding yellow ices like votives, advancing in the dying light to the Faheys' eight-step stoop,... and, of course, me. All the while, y'see, I'd remained transfixed by an afterimage whose spell the jingle jangle, the clink and clatter, the natter of the curious and the bothered, all of it, were powerless to lift.

I regretted the passing of the Colossus of Clout—well, the hour of his passing, for had the great Bambino hung on for but thirty minutes longer, I would have won the lottery, which by then had swelled to \$31.25—over three hundred dollars today. As by rule the winner had to produce the winning chit within twenty-four hours or forfeit his winnings to “the house,” that being Mikey, for organizing, y'see, the night's entertainment, which he did regularly for all sporting events, and for which he'd made a suspension, or an extension, or a pretension, for the minute of the hour that the Babe, “born astride a grave,” as he put what I didn't get, would meet his fate.

That night Mamie issued no warning. She didn't have to. Just we three took our cake-an'-tay.

Later, in bed, staring stonily at the bronze single bar bulb overhead, I felt guilty about regretting the Babe's—well, y'know, losing out on the lottery. I was sure such disrespect was some kind of sin, a shallow one, I hoped, venial so-called. But then, with wildly beating heart and, even now, the nervous pleasure of excited feelings,—*sceitimíni*, as the Irish say,— I doubted not that I, for the first time in my young life, had drifted into mortal waters.

The next evening, as the solid oak duel chime mantel clock struck seven, JK appeared—and presto! produced from the pocket of his threadbare heather grey cardigan the winning chit, which he redeemed, but didn't stay or ever came again for cake-an'-tay.

Mikey was furious, Mamie, well, curious. I—I was, am,—well, it all depends—I mean, y'know, on the deformed footfalls that happen to echo in the pink wine of caverned memory amid the deadly horrors of unavailing regret, with no reason no rhyme, only an everlasting chromatic photogene, of an allicient lady in lime. . . . Y'know what I mean?

end

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

*I hold what is, I suppose, the uncommon view that all fiction is memoir and all memoir is fiction. Which means that all my stories contain fictive and nonfictive elements. Thus, with one singular exception every character in 'The Night the Babe Died' ...I knew while growing up. So, as well—at times I think even more intimately, given their fixtures in memory's hiding places—the Fahey's eight step brownstone stoop, the lamppost, Luigi's candy store, the lemon ice cart, and perhaps most of all, the August light of that night the Babe died. Such is the stuff that the narrator's Fisher King's wound so to say, is made of, a wound that is the beginning of consciousness, away from the innocent perfection of childhood's unconsciousness. And like consciousness itself, his wound—symbolically sexualized in the *Lady in Lime*—will never close till 'the doom of death fold him round.'*

*Some of my literary heroes...is 'worship' to strong?..include Edith Wharton for 'Soul is more bruisable than flesh.' (*The Reckoning*). Virginia Woolf for 'The soul must brave itself to endure.' (*Mrs. Dalloway*) or 'that little piece of sky that sleeps beside the moon.' (*To the Lighthouse*). Henry James, of course, 'The Path of Duty'... 'I am dejected. I am bored. I am blue.' Ford Maddox Ford for his inimitable opening, 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard.' Gabriel Garcia Marquez... 'It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love'. Raymond Carver, I mean, how can you not be smitten with a writer who begins a story, 'A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house. Except for the chrome hooks, he was an ordinary looking man of fifty or so.'? (*Viewfinder*). Endings? Well, for me, hands down, the final paragraph of Joyce's 'The Dead', which, had he penned nothing else would grant him literary immortality.*

*Ah, and the poets...Yeats for rhythm, for cadence, for rhyme ('When You are Old'). Burnside for coining my motto as a story teller, 'Nothing I know matters more than what never happened.' ('Hearsay'). And, for life achievement, Lawrence Durrell for *The Alexandria Quartet*, the best for me of the last century, and from which I now paraphrase Pursewarden: 'I do not write for those who will not read what I have written more than once....(Hmm, come to think of it that may explain all the rejections.)*

BIO:

After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad including *The Saint Anne's Review*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *The Broken City*, *The Fem*, *Dual Coast*, *The Fiction Pool*, *Subtle Fiction*, *Fiction Week Literary Journal*, *Ariel Chart*, *Star 82 Review*, *Children, Churches, and Daddies*, *The Blotter Magazine*, *Ceruove*, *Caveat Lector*, *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions* and *Kairos*. Barry lives with his wife and daughters in Santa Barbara, California.

