

## JIMMY

"Seamus sends his love," Father Garvey read in his slow, ponderous voice "and says to tell ye all he's in excellent health and will send a Mass card on the anniversary."  
"Oh, God bless his heart, father" said Ma, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. That boy was the greatest son a mother could wish for. It's hard, father, what with all the boys in America. Only Jimmy left now. "

Ma leaned back caught on a wave of emotion.

Father Garvey took a sip of his tea. "I understand he's doing quite well, over there," he said.

"Oh, yes, father. I always knew he would amount to something, not like this lay-about, here " she nodded at Jimmy, "getting into trouble, calling me terrible names, Father. Oh, I'm sorely tried, I can tell."

"Jimmy wouldn't be thinking of joining, Seamus, would he?"

"God bless me, no, father. He would never think of leaving his home. Would you, Jimmy?"

Jimmy didn't answer. His mouth was too full of pie. He took a big slurp of tea and belched loudly.

"Oh, Jimmy, have some manners. Don't mind him, father. You wouldn't leave your mother, all on her own, would you Jimmy?" Ma persisted. "Of course he wouldn't, father."

"Quite so, quite so." said Father Garvey.

Ma never used the big room now unless Father Garvey or some other dignitary came to visit. It had a cold, uninvited smell. There were never many visitors. Seamus used to have friends over. But Seamus had been in New York for a year now and all his friends were in America too.

"Well, come again father, " said Ma, showing him to the door "and thanks for reading the letter, my eyes aren't what they used to be, you know."

She closed the door.

"Jimmy, come and sit with me for a while."

Jimmy turned around sheepishly, his coat already half on.

"Where are you off too?"

"I was going down to the green, for a bit."

"Would you not stay with your mother, even for half an hour" she cried out.

Jimmy hung his coat on the back of the door.

"Come in to the kitchen, I'll make you some dinner. That's a good lad."

"Well, I'll stay for a little while."

"That's my boy. We'll have a lovely time. "

Ma went bustling off into the kitchen to start the dinner.

"It's great to hear from Seamus, isn't it Jimmy. " she prattled. "And he's doing so well, over in New York. I hope he keeps warm. Mr. Mangan was saying the winter is something fierce, there. Not to mention all the crazy, mad people. Will you have one or two eggs? Two eggs are not very healthy, mind you. Mr. Mangan said he would give you a job, at the store, when you finish school."

"What did ya do that for?" said Jimmy angrily.

"Would you not work, there and make a bit of money. Sure, it would be a grand little job. "

"I'm not working for that fecking bastard. And that's the end of it. He's a miserly old scrooge, counting his pennies, and selling his overpriced goods."

"Don't talk like that. Seamus worked down on Murphy's farm for a summer" she continued. "He used to get up at the crack of dawn, and be gone all day and did you ever hear a word of complaint out of him?"

There was a ring on the door.

"Who could that be?" said Ma, annoyed.

"It's Sean," said Jimmy. "I was supposed to meet him down at the green."

"Oh" said Ma.

Sean came in.

"Hello, Sean " said Ma, stiffly." Jimmy was just about to have his dinner. Maybe he could drop around to you later."

"Don't be silly, Ma " said Jimmy." Come in Sean and sit down. Will you have a cup of tea?"

"I will."

Sean sat himself down at the kitchen table.

"When are you leaving, then" said Ma.

"I'll be off in a week. I have my passage booked on the Queen Mary," said Sean.

"Don't go filling my Jimmy, full of notions in the next few days" said Ma.

"Jimmy will make his own decisions, I'm sure," said Sean.

"Oh, Ma." Sean and I are going to the dance, tonight. Can you give me some money?" said Jimmy.

"How much? Jimmy, you know how hard it is to make ends meet. I've told you time and again. I'll give you a pound."

She rummaged in her bag and counted out the coins, one by one.

"Is that enough?" she said, pointedly." Here's another shilling. "

Later Jimmy and Sean stood on the doorstep.

"Don't be late, Jimmy" she called after him, as she closed the door.

"Did you get it?" said Jimmy.

"Did I get it...? Of course I did " he pointed at a paper bag, just visible under the bush." I didn't want to bring it inside with your Ma there" he explained.

"Hope you got Bulmers" said Jimmy.

"Yes I did. Here is yours." He handed him his bottle.

They walked on in silence, plumes of air rising from their breath. They stopped on the green near a park bench. During the day kids played here. Now it was deserted.

"Smoke?" said Sean, taking a packet from his jacket.

"Cheers". He unscrewed the cap and took a big swig.

"Been looking forward to this all day," said Jimmy. "Did you get the tickets?"

"I have them right here," said Sean.

"How much were they?"

"Ten shillings each"

"A tenner, Jesus Christ, that's a rip off."

Sean pulled on his cigarette.

"Amazing" he said. "In a week I'll be out of here. No more of this place. Thank God, I couldn't stand another minute of it." He paused.

"What are you going to do, Jimmy?" He took a gulp of cider.

"I don't know"

"You could come with me. There's still time to get a ticket. You don't want to stay here for the rest of your life. Do you?"

"I don't know," said Jimmy. "What about Ma?"

"What about her?" His voice was rising as the alcohol took effect. He jumped up on the park bench.

"I can see it now" he declaimed. "Jimmy Malone and Sean Keogh on Broadway. Two of the richest men in the whole of New York, the whole of America, indeed." He turned to face him. "Don't you want to make something of yourself?" he continued.

"Look at Mangan or any of those other fools down in O'Brien's pub, every night. They'll never be anyone important, or famous. They're not even trying.

"This place" he gestured with his hand, around him. "Who would notice if it was wiped off the map? Nobody. Nothing ever happened here. And nothing ever will."

He looked at his watch.

"Come on, Jimmy. We'll be late."

They walked down the green, draining the dregs and throwing the bottles into the lilac bushes. Main Street was quiet at this hour. Jimmy was drunk and stumbling as he walked. They passed by Mangan's store. The sign said "Mangan's Groceries and Home Supplies". Jimmy gave it a kick that sent it flying across the street. The light came on above the store.

"Quick, run" said Sean. "Mangan's waking up."

They ran. Passed the pub and the petrol station. Around the fountain and up the hill. Stopping only when they reached the cemetery. In the distance they could see the

dancehall, lit up in the surrounding darkness. Bicycles passed by them as people converged from all over.

"There's Nell McCaffrey " said Sean " and her sister, Aoife. Howya, Aoife " he called out, as they rode past.

"Don't talk to that scoundrel, Aoife" cried out Nell.

It was still early and the hall was only half full.

"Let's go into the field. I have a bottle in my pocket." said Sean.

"Nell's angry at me" he said, by way of explanation.

"Weren't you going with her?" said Jimmy.

"Ah, I was. But it would be selfish of me; to confine myself to one woman " said Sean. He laughed.

They lay on the ground looking up. The night was clear and the stars shone out in all their brilliance. Jimmy felt a warm, fuzzy glow gradually envelope him. Sean's whiskey was taking effect.

"How do you do it?" he said.

"Do what?" said Sean.

"You know, with the girls."

"D'ya want to know the secret" said Sean, slurring his words, slightly. He leaned forward, conspiratorially.

"The secret is," he broke off in a fit of alcoholic laughter "the secret is...confidence."

Jimmy got up and stood unsteadily on his feet.

"I hate this place," he shouted to the stars "I hate Father Garvey, and the church, and the school, and that bastard Mangan, and all they stand for."

"Come on, Jimmy. Let's go to the dance."

They climbed the sty, slowly, like two old men, negotiating an obstacle. Voices and music carried on the night air. They paid their five quid and went in. It was hot and dark, inside. The flashing lights and loud music intruded on his senses. He was dimly aware of the McCaffrey sisters in the corner. Sean was talking in a very animated way with Aoife. An argument or altercation of some kind was taking place. From the

corner of his eye he saw Nell with the pint of Guinness. The next minute it was all over. Sean was dripping wet and covered in Guinness. Jimmy laughed.

Then they were dancing, all of them. Sean and Nell, Jimmy and Aoife, then Sean and Aoife, Jimmy and Nell, on and on without stopping.

"Jimmy, Jimmy. Get up will ya?" Ma was calling from the bottom of the stairs.

It took a second for him to realize where he was. He was lying fully dressed on his bed. The sun streamed in through the open window.

"Jimmy, Jimmy. Are ya alright?" Ma's voice was approaching.

"Go away" he shouted.

"But you'll be late for ten o'clock Mass. Father Garvey is giving his sermon." The door was opening, now.

"Get out, you ole biddy."

"Don't talk to your mother like that. If your father was alive he'd teach you a lesson." The door shut again.

He lay back on the bed, stricken with remorse. She was only concerned. She didn't deserve that. As a peace gesture he decided he would go to Mass after all. Normally he would pretend to go to the late Mass at five and meet Sean for a smoke on the green instead.

He made his way gingerly down the stairs. Ma was in the kitchen, bustling about.

"I suppose you were out drinking with that vagrant, Sean Keogh," she said as he came in.

"I wasn't drinking" he said, stung by the accusation.

"Your room smelled like a brewery this morning. It will be good riddance to bad rubbish, when Sean Keogh is gone," said Ma.

"Don't talk about Sean like that" said Jimmy, raising his voice, "if you don't watch out I might be on that boat, with him."

Ma's face went pale.

"You wouldn't do that, Jimmy would ya? Leave your poor, old mother all on her own? You wouldn't Jimmy, would ya?" There was a pleading, almost pathetic look in her eyes.

He felt a wave of sympathy, suddenly. She looked haggard and older than he had ever realized. He sat disconsolately in the pew beside Ma. She insisted on being near the front where Father Garvey could see them.

Jimmy leaned back into his seat. The amplified platitudes of Father Garvey seemed to drift over him like waves. He lost track of the words, just the voice, slightly choleric, too many cigarettes and whiskeys. To his right and left along the sides of the church, the Stations of the Cross played out the suffering and death of Jesus. Jimmy looked up above the altar where a life-size statue of St. Patrick gazed down benignly on his flock.

He rose for Holy Communion with Ma in the lead. Across the aisle Sean grinned at him as he passed by.

"In the name of the Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit" Father Garvey intoned, gravely, as he placed the white disk on his tongue. It tasted like cardboard all hard and brittle. He rested it on the roof of his mouth so he could swallow it in one quick gulp. He felt nauseous as he retook his seat.

The next morning he crossed over Byrne's field and put on a spurt. He was late and would hear no end of it from Mr. Morton. His bag rattled around his waist as he ran. Across the early morning mist he heard the church bell ring out the hour. Mr. Morton was already in the classroom as he knocked on the door.

"Ah, Jimmy" said Mr. Morton "it's an honor for you to join us. Please come in."

The class sniggered.

"Sorry, I'm late, sir."

"Ah, yes, no doubt. That's what you said last time. Come see me after class, Jimmy."

Jimmy sat at his desk, out of breath.

"For your benefit, Jimmy, we've been discussing the seven holy sacraments. Perhaps you could remind us of what they are"

"Baptism, Communion, Marriage and..." Jimmy faltered.

"There's four more, don't forget, Jimmy"

The class laughed.

"Jimmy seems to be having difficulty. Anyone care to enlighten him. Ah, yes, Micheal." Mr. Morton positively beamed at Micheal.

"Cccconfirmmmmmmmationnnnnnnnn" he stammered.

"Excellent. Make a note of that, Jimmy," said Mr. Morton.

Jimmy was staring out the window. From his desk he could see down Main Street and beyond. The town looked so small. Hardly a town, more like a collection of streets with an aspiration to something more, to a growth and expansion that never quite took place. He saw it in the spacious streets, laid out by the munificence of some long forgotten aristocrat, the cobblestones, the fountain that didn't work, and beyond, the rolling hills of Longford, waiting patiently to reclaim what had been taken from them.

"Jimmy!" Mr. Morton was shouting now.

"You know what" Jimmy said, calmly, "you can take the seven sacraments, and shove 'em right up your arse, 'cos I couldn't care less."

The classroom was stunned into silence. Mr. Morton went beetroot with rage.

"Get out! Get out! I'll deal with you, later."

He knew where he could find Sean, at this time of the day. He was taking his ease outside O'Briens. He sat with the old men of the town enjoying the morning sun.

"Jimmy, what are you doing here?" said Sean.

Jimmy relayed the story. Sean burst out laughing.

"Morton told you to get out. I'd love to have been there."

"So tomorrow is the big day," said Jimmy.

"Yeah. Tomorrow I'm going and I won't be coming back."

"I'm going to miss you, Sean."

"Did you think about what I said? I wasn't joking. There's a ticket for you if you want it. You could be on that train with me tomorrow. Think about it, Jimmy." There was

a new urgency in his voice. "Think about it tonight, like you've never done before. This chance might never be offered to you again."

"I don't know."

"I'll say no more" said Sean. "You'll know where to find me if you change your mind."

He wound his way home, slowly, in no rush to arrive. Ma, doubtless, would have already heard from Mr. Morton about the latest scandal and would be waiting with some choice words. The day had an air tinged with unreality. Past Main Street he was already in open country and the fields rolled down to meet the road. The midday sun had burnt off the mist and the air was humid and heavy. Every rock and stone, bush and tree was known intimately to him. Behind these bushes he and Sean had fought and killed a thousand Indians. That tree was the hideout where they had spent one sweltering summer. Beyond was the river where they had dived and fished for quartz and other precious stones.

Ma's face registered surprise when he came in the back.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"Mr. Morton told me to go home."

"Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy. What did you do? What happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"What happened? Tell your Ma, there's my boy."

"Nothing. Leave me alone for once in my life." He slammed the door violently behind him as he stomped up the stairs to his room.

The day suddenly seemed strangely quiet. He sat on the bed. Below he could hear Ma moving about in the kitchen. She thought better than to come up after him. He must have dozed off, because the next thing he knew Ma was calling him. The shadows had lengthened as afternoon gave way to evening.

"Will ya have some dinner, Jimmy? Come on down and have some dinner with your mother."

"I'm not hungry."

"Don't be like that, Jimmy. I cooked your favorite stew."

"Go away."

He heard the sound of her footsteps retreating down the stairs. The shadows grew and darkened. The room was filled with an orange glow as the sun gradually dipped below the horizon. Outside he could hear Meehan cursing one of his sheep that had strayed onto the road and the sound of Dr. Griffiths car passing as he paid his daily visit to old Mrs. Tanner.

The noises died away as the night wore on. Finally he heard the rustling sounds of Ma making her way slowly up the stairs. Her legs creaked and cracked as she passed his door. He heard a sigh as she bent down to pick up something from the floor. She was humming softly, to her herself. He heard her fussing about the room and the low monotone of her three decades of the Rosary.

Finally the bed creaked as she lay down to sleep. He waited another half an hour to be sure. The silence seemed almost palpable. Once she cried out in her sleep. But then all was quiet again. She must have been dreaming. He rose quickly and quietly now without the slightest sound. He pulled the old knapsack out from under his bed. It was covered in dust. One side was stained black where Seamus had left a banana to rot years ago. In it he placed his favorite shirt and jeans and the old cloth jacket Seamus had left behind by mistake. From a hole behind the bed, cunningly covered by the calendar his savings. He knew exactly how much. Twenty-three pound, seventeen shillings and four pence.

He stood out on the landing his breathing stilled. The house seemed peaceful and almost inviting compared to the dark winter's night outside. He made his way down the stairs cringing at every creak, pausing for long minutes on each step. The kitchen was his final destination before leaving. It could be days before he ate again. He busied himself with sandwiches and other preparations.

So engrossed was he in his work he didn't hear the soft creaking sound of footsteps on the stairs, nor the sighs and exclamations as Ma muttered softly to herself. The first sign was the door opening.

Ma entered sleepy-eyed.

"Jimmy, what are you doing up so late? Why are you all dressed?"

Realization hit her in a sudden wave.

"Jimmy, Jimmy, what are you doing? Where are you going? You're not leaving with that rascal, Sean Keogh."

Jimmy spoke as though he was having difficulty forming his words.

"I'm leaving with Sean, on the train and don't try and stop me."

"You're mad," Ma retorted, "what will you do out there, on your own? Who'll look after you, Jimmy? Sure, you can't even cook your own dinner, or do your own laundry."

Anger boiled up inside him.

"They're all things you do," he shouted, "but not because you have to, but because you want to."

"Don't you understand," he continued. "Don't you see? I'm old enough now to look after myself. I don't need you to cluck over me anymore. I don't want you to look after me, to bother me and check up on me. I don't want it and I hate it."

He stopped suddenly to look at her. Ma wasn't speaking anymore. She was crying. Crying more than he had ever seen her cry. She looked old. Incredibly old. There was something grotesque, almost comical, about this elderly woman, in her nightdress, bawling.

"I'm leaving now, Ma," said Jimmy, more softly. She didn't look up or acknowledge what he had said. He picked up his bag and closed the door softly behind him.

Outside the birds were announcing the approach of the new day.

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