

## *THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS*

Mid-December, a threat of snow in the Boston area. The pub was in its hyper-festoon mode; anything not capable of locomotion was decorated in some way or another. For the first time since we had moved to the neighborhood from New York, there was a fire in the fireplace - a real wood fire, not a pretend gas one.

Altogether a very homey atmosphere, either because of or in spite of the feverish decorating that had taken place. Mike the Dog looked up at me with a big question mark on his collie face as we entered - too many new smells for his canine sense apparatus to handle without a few preliminary adjustments.

The regulars were seated in their never-varying locations, imbibing their usual potations of choice. The conversation seemed to be about Christmas memories from their respective childhoods. I ordered a Jameson's for myself and a couple of Milk-Bones for Mike. - *Would it be okay if I give him a dish of this stuff, Mr. B?* asked Jimmy the bartender, holding a container of egg-nog at a strange distance from his body, a little like a new father might hold a first child experiencing an attack of loose bowels. - *I can't stand this stuff myself, and nobody else here wants anything to do with it, but maybe our friend here . . . ?*

I tried to recall from my ten years' experience of sharing Mike's life whether or not he had ever been exposed to egg-nog, but I couldn't be sure. I did however remember the time he had appeared to consume a half-bucket of wallpaper paste without ill effects, so I gave the approval for a dish of egg-nog. Jimmy produced same, Mike sniffed it cautiously, and after a glance upwards at me, set out with a wagging tail to demolish the contents.

In the meantime the conversation, interrupted by greetings, was continuing.

- *The sight of your man Mike there lapping away at that strange liquid, now that reminds me of something we always used to have around this time of year back home in Kerry, said Warty. - I was still a youngster myself, so I don't recall*

## THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS

*all the details, but it was a drink my Uncle Tommy would manufacture, to have ready when visitors would come to call. He called it "blasht", and after a few sips, you'd understand why. I watched him make it one Christmas Eve, and my heart to God, I was afraid later I would be brought up on charges of being an accessory to manslaughter. He would take a big bowl and dump in tumblers of poteen, gin, sherry, brandy, and any other alcoholic beverage in the vicinity. He'd stir them all up with a big wooden spoon - I think metal or plastic would have melted, but we didn't have the like of that high tech stuff in those days - then pour in pieces of orange peel, three or four wedges of lemon, a few grapes, raisins, a few apples if he could find them . . . one year somebody sent us some grapefruits from Florida, and sure enough they made their way into the "blasht". Fair play to Uncle Tommy, though - he did draw the line at those kiwi fruit things when they started to show up later in the shops . . . he said he didn't mind ugly, but hairy was another matter altogether. Warty shuddered slightly. - I tried the "blasht" once and that was enough, I wouldn't go near it again on a bet. That was one foul concoction, I can tell you . . . the strange thing was that nobody else seemed to mind. I never knew till years later that Uncle Tommy was in the funeral business in some way or another, but I wasn't the least bit surprised when I found out.*

The lads nodded in appreciation of Uncle Tommy's creativity, in honor of which there was a brief interlude during which pint glasses were put to the use the good Lord had intended for them.

Kevin the fireman cleared his throat significantly. - *Did I ever tell you the story of Little Séamus and the trombone? Now there's a Christmas story for you, guaranteed to warm the cockles of your heart . . .*

- *Is that a story that has a ragged little orphan in it?* asked the Bunser in a concerned tone of voice. - *Because if it is, I don't want to hear it. I can't bear stories about orphans . . .* He sniffed and wiped at an incipient tear. - *There used be a foreman down at the gas company when I first came out here, a god-forsaken butty wretch from Offaly named Jimmy Feeney, who used to love*

## THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS

*tormenting me by telling orphan stories he'd make up just so the other lads could watch me get all emotional. They thought it was comical to see a six-three twenty-three-year-old who played rugby for rest and relaxation start to get teary at the mere mention of the word orphan, but that's the way I was and it couldn't be helped. One day I remember I got fed up with all the tormenting, and I picked up little Jimmy Feeney and dangled him by his scrawny little Adam's apple over an airshaft until he apologized for all his orphan nonsense. After that - or maybe it was after I broke Con Hynes' jaw, God rest him - I heard no more about orphans.*

*- No orphans, I give you my word, said Kevin the fireman. - Thank God for small favors, muttered Mick Fahy from his end of the bar.*

*- But you know, Bunser, I get the same feeling about trombones, said Dessie the Dub. - I couldn't explain to you why, maybe it has to do with the Salvation Army or something, but Christmas and trombones are a bad combination for me . . . He seemed to be holding back tears and had difficulty continuing. - I hear a trombone, or even talk about one, and I'm back in a tiny cold flat in the Coombe freezing my arse off and waiting for Christmas. And I don't for the life of me know what the hell any of that has to do with trombones . . . He shook his head at the insolubility of his private puzzle. The lads pondered, but had no assistance to offer.*

If Mike the Dog had the solution, he wasn't saying, preferring instead to concentrate on finishing off what was left of the egg-nog. Jimmy the bartender, trained to notice an empty receptacle, did his duty as Mike stood by watching appreciatively, and once its contents had been transferred to Mike's dish, Jimmy tossed away the empty container with a look of relief. *- I hope I get through the holiday without having any more of that stuff around . . . barring a pint or so I may keep aside for our friend Mike here, he added as an afterthought. - Nice to see that somebody enjoys it so much!*

*- I had a cousin from Leitrim, Big John we called him, could play jigs and reels*

## THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS

*on a trombone, said Mick Fahy, who during a trip to the gent's had obviously been trying to sort out Dessie the Dub's trombonophobia. - Amazing what that man could do. He had started on the flute, but he wasn't much good at it. Then one year the schoolmaster arranged for him to get a trombone and an instruction book, and begod after a few lessons from McNulty the bandmaster, he was off to the races. Folk used come from twenty parishes around to watch him play at a céili, and I'll tell you it was a sight worth seeing. The problem was that no other musician would play with him except a piano player named Artie Dennehy, everybody knew him as Mittens, who was legally deaf and more or less crippled with the artheritis, but I tell you the music that those two made would have been worth recording. After a Clare set, Big John would have to lubricate the slide mechanism of his yoke - he liked to use sheep's fat, or Jeyes' soap if he couldn't find a sheep - or else the heat would build up so bad that he couldn't hold the machine for the next set. One night after a Siege of Ennis, the trombone actually started to smoke . . . Big John had to take it outside to cool down while Mittens played a few waltzes to keep the crowd happy. But the whole thing ended the night that Big John got carried away playing "The Bucks of Oranmore" and accidentally belted Mittens in the head with the slide . . . knocked the poor bastard right off the piano bench into the Widow Flaherty's lap. Mittens was unconscious, but the Widow wasn't, and next thing we knew the banns were posted . . . Big John was invited to the wedding, but was asked to bring his whistle and not his trombone. He traded it to a tinker a few weeks after for a set of second-hand kitchen utensils that he gave to his wife for Christmas. She went to the priest to complain, but he said it wasn't enough for a separation, and anyway hadn't the husband finally gotten rid of the trombone? Well, mad and all as she was, she had to concede that the priest had a point, so she forgot the separation and instead brought her mother to them for two months.*

Shivers of horror ran up as many human spines as there were in the pub, followed by a welcome respite as Jimmy the bartender administered refills. - *Can I tell my story about Little Séamus now?* asked an annoyed Kevin the fireman, obviously now less interested in cockle-warming than in getting his

## THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS

chance to hold forth. - *Once upon a time, there was a little lad named Séamus who . . .*

- *My wife's second cousin's husband is named Séamus, interrupted The Bunser from the midst of some private thought process of his own. - He was a musician too, played with the Cappataggle Ceili Band, you often heard of them, famous for never in twenty years having any two of its nine instruments in tune. They made some great recordings, but you can't find any of them now . . . there was a rumor going around our town that one of the big traditional music people from up in Dublin had bought all the copies and ordered them to be destroyed, but we never could find out any more about it. Cousin Séamus and Larry Daly were the fiddlers, great friends they were, but the problem was that they hated the band's two flute players, the Conlan twins . . . it had to do with a piece of land, I think, but begod it was a fierce situation, lots of subtle and not-so-subtle pokings with bows, dribbling flutes, and the like . . . And to make matters worse, the Conlan twins didn't get along with either of the box players, and THEY didn't care much for the piano player . . . the only one who got along with everybody was Bobby the drummer. He was the one who suggested bribing the judges the year the band competed at the Fleadh, so they made him business manager . . . well, not only did the Cappataggles not win, but Bobby disappeared soon after with the band's bank account. Somebody said he opened a pub in I believe Teneriffe under a false name. The band got another drummer, but they broke up right after the big fight at the Christmas céili over in Ballinasloe . . . the first time anybody remembered a crowd standing around watching a band fighting. They didn't get many offers to play after that.*

From somewhere distant the lovely sound of Christmas carols drifted into the pub. The lads sat listening, and the pub was silent except for the sound of the crackling fire. Mike the dog had made his way over to the fireplace - conceivably the first one he had ever seen - and had immediately gone blissfully to sleep. I was going to ask Jimmy the Bartender what if anything he had put in Mike's egg-nog, but he was busy at the other end of the bar.

## THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS

The pub door opened, and an older poorly-dressed black man came slowly into the pub. He seemed uncomfortable. Mike awakened and watched the man with wide eyes, but made no effort to leave his spot in front of the fireplace. - *How's it going, TJ?* asked Jimmy the bartender, leaning across the bar to shake the stranger's hand. - *It's been a while since we've seen you. Family all well?*

There were handshakes and greetings from the others as well. I was surprised in spite of myself; I had never seen the man before. Mike and I were introduced to him, and we shook hands and wished each other Merry Christmas. Mike got a prolonged scratch between the ears, which meant that TJ now had another friend for life.

TJ responded warmly to the various inquiries, although I thought his hearty tone of voice seemed at odds with the worried look on his face. Mick Fahy got up and offered him a seat, but TJ refused with thanks, saying he couldn't stay; outside the long-threatened snow had started falling, with a vengeance. In the meantime Jimmy the bartender had disappeared into the back. When he returned, he handed TJ an envelope and a shot of Jameson's. TJ downed the shot quickly, placed the envelope in his breast pocket, and left the pub as mysteriously as he had entered it, stopping on his way out to wish us all a Merry Christmas. There might have been tears in his eyes but it was too dark to know for sure.

I didn't have to ask. - *That's our friend TJ,* explained Jimmy the bartender. - *Used to work construction with Eddie Doyle, the day bartender here. Had an accident a few years ago and can't work - the insurance ran out pretty fast and the lawyers are still doing their thing. In the meantime he's got a family to raise and his wife's not in the best of health, so we try to help him out when we can. He swears he'll pay us back, but we don't much care if he does or not, do we, lads?*

There were smiles and indications of "no" the length of the bar. - *TJ's the salt of the earth,* said The Bunser. - *No better man to help when he needs it,*

## THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS

*and besides what else would we do with all our vast wealth? The others chuckled.*

*- TJ was the first to offer help when Ernie Quillan had his accident, do you remember? asked Dessie the Dub. - Helped Ernie on his own time, took care of all the paperwork, even donated two pints of blood . . . TJ and the Missus came to the benefit dance we had down at the union hall in Southie, and they got a standing ovation from two hundred and fifty Irishmen. I'll never forget it. That was a special Christmas Eve, I can tell you.*

The others, all of whom seemed familiar with the details, nodded in affirmation. Mike the Dog, borne back to his land of collie dreams, sighed in contentment. Again the sounds of the fire and the Christmas music were the only sounds in the pub.

*- I don't know why I thought about this just now, said Kevin the Fireman quietly. - Maybe it's the singing outside. I always did have a soft spot for Christmas music. Anyway I remember my mother telling us about a story that Mary and the Child had passed through their town around Christmas one year. I don't recall how the story got started, but apparently some strangers appeared in the town at about the time that a very sick young girl recovered unexpectedly from her illness. And then the people in the next town said the same thing happened to them, and then more towns got involved, until everyone had claimed to see the Mother and Child . . . different towns had their own versions of the story, and the county was getting pretty puffed up about it, newspaper people coming in from all arts and parts to cover the story, interviews and pictures and the whole lot, and arguments as to who did and who didn't . . . It was getting pretty unbearable, until finally that crusty old Bishop Finnerty made a statement from the cathedral pulpit one Sunday, saying in effect that there was nothing to the rumor and suggesting that people would do themselves a service spending more time looking for the real Jesus Christ than in worrying about miraculous appearances. Well, that pretty much brought everyone back to their senses, and everyone pretended that THEY knew it was just a travelling*

## THE REGULARS DISCUSS CHRISTMAS

*mother and child, and that the miraculous cures were just coincidences . . . you know how people are, especially in small towns. The whole incident was forgotten in three or four weeks' time, but you know that in spite of that, my mother believed till her last day that she had actually seen Mary and the Child passing through Galway that Christmas . . .*

*- It's hard to say where you would find Him these days, said Mick Fahy. - A lot wrong with the world, sure you might not recognize Him at all . . . maybe the old bishop was right. But still . . .*

The sounds of "Silent Night", muffled by the heavy snowfall, came in from outside. I looked at my watch: time to head home. Mike left his spot by the fireplace with extreme reluctance and stretched his way towards the door. Farewells and holiday greetings were extended from all sides. - *Remember now we're closed from six o'clock on Christmas Eve to 4 p.m. on Stephen's Day*, said Jimmy the bartender. - *Time for all to be home with families and friends . . . and dogs.* Mike seemed to understand and gave Jimmy a grateful tail-wag.

As we entered the snowy world, the unseen choir had started on "Gloria in Excelsis". Back in the pub, Dessie the Dub was pondering on the reason the angels always sang in Latin. - *And who would have understood them, tell me that? Only the Romans, and we all know what they were like.*

*- Now hold on a minute, retorted The Bunser, even at this time of year always ready for an argument. - Sure the Romans weren't all bad. Didn't some big professor at Trinity College just discover that they had invented the cordeen . . . ?*

The door closed behind us as the learned discussion on the involvement of the Romans with the accordion was engaged. Somewhere in the white distance came the rattle of tire chains, and I knew we were in for a fierce night, but somehow we could still hear the music of the mysterious choir . . .

*Gloria in excelsis Deo! Nollaig shona duit! Merry Christmas!*