

THE REGULARS DISCUSS IRISH DANCING

Not long ago Mike the Dog and I wandered down to our favorite local to catch a Sox game and obtain maybe a pint for me and a Milk-bone for Mike. My wife, whom I normally love dearly, had either hidden or lost the TV remote somewhere, and since she was at a parish council meeting I didn't feel right about interrupting God's work with a frivolous question (especially considering how the Sox were playing that week).

Totally unsurprisingly, the regulars were all in evidence in Danny Finn's when we arrived, and there were greetings all around, especially for Mike who the lads hadn't seen in a while. Tongues and tail wagged in unison while old acquaintance was being renewed. Eventually they remembered that I was there too.

As Mike and I sat to enjoy our respective treats, I noticed that the television was off - an odd thing for a game night. Before I could make a comment to big Jimmy the bartender, however, what appeared to have started before our arrival as a heated discussion resumed on all sides of us. As usual, Mike and I were left to figure out what had gone before by what followed - not always the most reliable way to comprehend what the lads were talking about.

- And do you think, Bunser, that your man there dressed all black and slimy like a two-legged eel, a hairy chested and sweaty eel at that, is really doing Irish dancing? asked Knuckles Delaney in a fierce but (so far) controlled voice. *- Because if you do, you haven't the foggiest notion of what Irish dancing is. Not the foggiest.*

- Begod, he leaps around shaking his arse as if he were in the throes of some strange illness, pissiorasis or the like, added Mick Fahey from his stool. *- And flapping his arms like a constipated crow, now what in Heaven's name is that all about? If I had tried any of those antics at Master Donnelly's when I was a lad doing my threes and sevens in Clare, I would have found myself in a lonely hospital bed with tubes shticking out of me and Ireland's best surgeons trying to figure out how the hell I had survived the whacking I got.*

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- *All I'm saying*, said The Bunser patiently but with the air of someone defending a position he realizes is indefensible, *is that his style of dancing is just that - his style of dancing. I don't think he ever said it was traditional. It's the people like us that know he's a great traditional dancer that get so angry at him, because he's not doing what we want him to keep doing. The people on the outside don't know any better, and they pay him handsomely to dance like that. So why shouldn't he do what he wants to do, tell me that?*

- *I remember when I was a lad*, said Jimmy the bartender. - *The mother, God rest her, thought for some reason that I would make a fine step-dancer. I took lessons for a few years, but then when I passed fifteen stone and started having to go to the local cattle jobber to get weighed, she figured that maybe I wasn't going to be a success with it after all. I went from step-dancing to hurling in about three weeks, and then rugby in another year . . . Sure the mother's heart was broken, but she never let on. Of course she's thrilled there in Heaven that our Nora and Kathleen are doing it now, and taking the odd prize here and there.*

- *Did you ever miss the dancing, Jimmy?* asked Mick Fahy. - *They say once it gets into your blood, you have to keep at it.*

- *Only the time over in Cardiff when I had two major bones broken in the same match*, said Jimmy. - *Only then, as I lay on the pitch bleeding and friendless and being laughed at by godforsaken Welshmen, did I give in to the thought that maybe a career tripping through "The Garden of Daisies" might not have been so bad after all . . .*

The thought of six-foot 250-pound Jimmy tripping through anything sent a wave of mirth the length of the bar, but the serious discussion soon resumed.

- *And yet your man is making a ton of money, rakes it in from all sides*, said Knuckles disgustedly. - *Well, more power to him I suppose. Maybe we'd all be rich if we had paid attention to it when we were young. But what bothers me is how all the kids are*

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being given the wrong idea by all this. Why, the other night I went to meet Jerry Morrissey over at the AOH hall in Watertown . . .

- Is that Jerry Morrissey, Big Pat Connolly's brother-in-law? - interrupted Warty, who had mercifully been silent to this point. - The one who worked for that big Italian contractor up in I think it was Lowell when he first came out from Ireland? The boyo who had never seen spaghetti in his life, and nearly threw up when he saw someone eating it because he thought it was worms? Ah God, a great man altogether, I haven't seen him in years . . .

- As I was saying, resumed Knuckles testily, I was in the AOH the other night to meet yes that Jerry and what do you think but they're having step-dancing classes that night upstairs in the big hall over the bar. And my heart to God, there must have been two hundred kids there where I had never seen more than a dozen . . . mostly girls of course, and all dressed in black tight things and not the sign of a dress like you'd remember. Then the class started, and for all the noise overhead you couldn't hear yourself think, so Jerry and I said the hell with it and went down to Meehan's for some peace and quiet, and I'll be damned if they didn't have "Riverdance" or the other thing on the TV when we walked in, Meehan's grand-daughter is involved in it some way so it's on the TV 18 hours a day. I'll tell you this, Jerry Morrissey got so depressed he forgot to cheat at darts. And it never helped at all that when the dance show was over, somebody put in a CD and we had to listen to some hot new group playing jigs and reels so fast that it made you dizzy. Jerry put down his darts, said something about "musical diarrhea", and walked out of Meehan's without finishing his pint or even saying good night. He did call me later to apologize, but I said it was OK - I understood perfectly.

- Jerry Morrissey was always sensitive, said Warty with one eye closed significantly. - Almost too sensitive for his own good, if you take my meaning. They nearly kicked him out of the union when they found out he wrote poems. He had to beat the bejayzus out of that big Sicilian amadhán, I forget his name, before they'd give him his card back, but I don't think they ever really trusted him again . . . write poems and wouldn't touch spaghetti - they knew he wasn't their kind . . .

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There was a brief silence while beverages were being consumed or replaced. Mike the Dog, having partaken of more Milk-Bones than any dog with a conscience ought to have eaten, lay in blissful contentment at my feet.

- I admit I don't like the new dress styles on the dancers, said The Bunser, but then again I was never crazy either about the ones they replaced. I couldn't swear to it, but it always seemed to me as if the designs and colors and what-all were getting whackier year after year . . . I was at one feis not long ago where I heard everyone complaining about how bad the dancing was. Of course I was curious, so I went into the competition tent to see for myself, and right away it was obvious what was the problem - the poor kids were so weighted down with junk that they could just about walk, much less dance. I even saw one poor little thing whose mother or aunt or somebody had actually managed to work tiny electric lights into the fabric . . . every time the kid moved, something would flash. The poor thing looked like a pinball machine. They had to take her out of the competition when she spilled some water on herself and short-circuited. The EMT's wouldn't touch her; the mother got hysterical when they told her to call the electric company instead. The EMTs meant it as a joke, but it was a very bad scene, very bad.

- You have a point, said Knuckles Delaney. - But I'm not sure that dressing everybody to look like Batman is the answer. And things tied around your head, and dangling from your . . .

- Carefully now, Delaney, said Mick Fahy. - We're in the archdiocese here, no improper anatomical references allowed.

- I was about to say "ears", Mick Fahy, said Knuckles. - No need for a homily.

- Ah well, sighed The Bunser. - I suppose in one way it's a good thing to get the kids interested, get their foot in the door as you might say. At least they're not sitting around playing those pointless video games. We can always hope that somehow or another they'll find their way to the real thing . . .

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- *And in the meantime?* said Knuckles Delany acidly. - *And in the meantime, what? They'll learn all the wrong things from teachers who are too scared not to give all this foolishness to them, like feeding Hershey bars to kids who don't realize that spinach is better for them . . .*

- *Or turnip,* said Warty, broadcasting from his own personal cosmos somewhere. - *I don't think any kid today would so much as look at a turnip, but I tell you we had them three times a day, seven days a week, when I was a boy. Fine big Swedes, boil them and mash them with butter, no better nourishment on God's green earth, still stand me in good stead even now and I'm seventy-six this November. And I'll say this: there were no better step-dancers in the parish than the O'Haras, we were known the length and breadth of Roscommon for it, folk used walk for miles to watch us at it. No leaping and strutting, no rump wiggling, by God, but the real thing. And it was the turnip did it, I have no doubt. Your man Flatley might be cock of the walk now, but if he's not careful about his turnip, he'll see himself falling apart overnight, mark my words . . .*

Mike the Dog had risen and shaken himself, and since he had given me his patented "Hey, I don't like the idea either, but we've got to get me outside somewhere" look, I figured it was time to call it a night. The Sox game - what I could see of it - was a total disaster. As usual with the regulars, no real conclusions had been arrived at, but as the evening was still relatively young I was sure that the discussion would continue until at least closing time.

Jimmy the bartender walked Mike and me to the door. - *Whaddaya think, Mr. B.?* he asked in a low voice. - *Is it because we're getting old or what?*

For the first time in his life, Mike the Dog growled. - *Mind your business, Mike,* said Jimmy with a laugh. - *This is a human problem, not a canine one.*

In the background Knuckles could clearly be heard. - *And another thing about your man Flatley. Not only is he knocking the almighty shite out of the tradition, he's also . . .*

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Mike gave his leash a tug: canine or not, he knew what he had to do, and fairly quickly. - *I don't think it's a question of getting old though, Mr. B.,* said Jimmy thoughtfully. - *I think it's a question of change. Some of us are for it, some are against it . . .*

Mike's patience was exhausted. He barked once, short, sharp, urgent.

- *And some of us want to get to the nearest tree as soon as possible! Well, bless the both of ye,* Jimmy said as he went back into the arena. - *I'll let you know how this one turns out.*

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