

THE REGULARS PONDER A KELTIC EXPERIENCE

One rainy evening not long ago I wandered into Danny Finn's for a pint or two before heading home to watch whatever was on Netflix, or maybe "Blue Bloods" re-runs.

It took me about seven nanoseconds after I had entered the pub to realize that something was wrong, or at least different. The regulars were all gathered around Bunser, who was sitting uncertainly on his accustomed stool; Rooskey even had his hand on Bunser's shoulder to steady him. He was deathly pale, and as he spoke in a low voice the lads were listening in concerned silence.

Concerned myself but not wanting to interrupt, I motioned Jimmy the bartender away from the group to inquire what was going on.

- Ah, bad news, Mr. B., said Jimmy, shaking his head the way you might if you had just bitten into a disappointing piece of fruit. - Bunser's had a Keltic experience of some kind, and by all appearances it nearly did for him. I gather it's even affected the marriage, from the little I've heard so far. Not good at all. We're about to get the details, so you arrived just in time.

I was about to pursue the matter further when Mick Fahy the twin came over to us. He was nearly as pale as Bunser. *- Our friend is about to describe his experience, he said in a polite undertakerish kind of way, and he'd like you two to be witnesses . . .*

Jimmy the bartender and I looked at one another and eased our way back into the circle of concerned listeners.

Satisfied that all "witnesses" were present and accounted for, Bunser took a long last sip from his shot glass and signalled weakly for another while the lads stood waiting for the monologue to resume. A snifter of brandy remained close at hand, apparently for medicinal purposes, but everyone was relieved to see that the whiskey had brought back some color to

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Bunser's cheeks. He seemed to be breathing fairly regularly, although he did have a little trouble getting the voice started. One probably would not have been too far wrong in the belief that Bunser was enjoying the moment.

- You would not believe what I saw tonight, he began in a solemn tone. - If I live another thousand years, I never want to see again what I saw this night. God spare us all from the like. And what I am going to describe to you now should serve as a warning . . .

He blessed himself dramatically with a trembling hand, and the lads all did the same. *- We're ready whenever you are, said Paul the fireman by way of encouragement. - And I think I speak for all of us when I say that we are prepared for the worst.* The others nodded in agreement.

Bunser took a short sip to finish his Paddy, followed by a deep breath. *- You all remember that I mentioned the other night that our daughter Nora and her husband were going to take the wife and me out for our anniversary. That much we knew, but exactly where we were going was to be the surprise . . . begod I'd say surprise all right. It turns out they had tickets for some kind of show downtown, at the Wang Center.*

He shuddered slightly and took a taste of the brandy, then another.

- I don't know why we thought it was an Irish show, but it . . . it was not. It was . . . something else, at least the part that I watched . . . the program said something about "Keltic", with a K. I suppose that was so we wouldn't think we were watching a basketball game . . . if only it had been. We should have known what we were in for when somebody ahead of us on line mentioned the Crystal Druid Collaborative Theater Company . . .

The lads looked at one another. *- The Crystal what? asked Paul the fireman.*

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- *Come here till I show you*, replied Bunser as he dug in his jacket pocket and produced as response a crumpled program. The front page was covered with ogham markings, thoughtfully translated into English underneath. On the back cover was a drawing of a beautiful woman, all wavy hair and curves and blossoms and little stars, with a lovely hand raised in a beckoning sort of way. Bunser regarded this image in silence for several seconds, then sighed deeply. - *If I had known then what I know now, I would have found some way of staying out of that building*, he said at last, handing the program to Paul the fireman for his inspection.

Bunser shivered slightly with eyes closed, overcome by the memory of what he had observed. The others looked at one another with furrowed brows.

- *Now that you mention Keltic*, said Mick Fahy the twin, *there was some of it on the television the other night, I don't recall the details, anyway it was on PBS opposite "Bowling for Dollars", my favorite program as you well know. Anyway during a commercial I clicked the old control to see what this Keltic program was all about, but all that was on the other channel was some smoke and funny sounds, long drawn out oooo-y sounds like the old cow back home the time she gave birth to twin calves . . . I thought maybe the TV station was on fire. I would have called 911 except that I had to go to the toilet and forgot all about it. When I came back the smoke and the noise were gone, now they were showing pictures of Ireland and asking for money, so back I went to my bowling channel and never left it the rest of the night.*

- *I watched a few minutes of that PBS show too*, said Warty after a few seconds' rummaging deep in his mental attic. - *A cow, now I don't remember her at all. But well I remember that goat that Mick Tierney sold your father. Gentle beast she was until your brother backed into her one morning with the combine harvester, then begod it was all hands away like those Spaniards running for their lives through Papilloma or whatever*

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that town is called. One of the Dennehy's took a puck of her horns right between the cheeks of his arse and wound up swinging from the middle branch of an oak tree . . . we peed ourselves with the laughing but he wouldn't come down until Monsignor Cronin I think it was went out and swore to him on a catechism that the poor old goat and the cow and all the other beasts had been tied up securely in the shed. Young Dennehy, Martin it was or maybe Seán, went to America soon after and the last I heard he owned a butcher shop in the Bronx somewhere, "Keltic Kuts" his mother said he named it . . . or maybe it was a barbershop like his uncle Larry had down in Tuam . . .

As Warty rambled, Bunser took the opportunity to down a bit more of the brandy. He seemed to be recovering nicely. - You know, Mick Fahy, you weren't far off the mark, he said. - There was indeed a great deal of mist and weird music, I never heard or saw anything like it. At the beginning the theater was totally dark except for some candles and maybe a few glowing glassy things hanging here and there off the ceiling . . . we sat listening to the noises wondering what was going on and when would the music start. Some of us poor unfortunates had no idea what we were in for, you see? Then suddenly a half dozen figures appeared out of the dark. They were dressed in long white robes and they were waving leaves around and chanting, I hadn't a clue what they were saying . . . then there was a fountain. Somewhere offstage there was a drum fight going on, I don't know how else to describe it, it sounded like twenty people beating the living shite out of twenty bodhráns . . . the whole theater shook, and the wife's glasses nearly fell off. Then everything stopped. A few seconds later a couple of dancers came out carrying torches . . . with all the fog and bubbling sounds that were in it, it reminded me of the time I worked in the Quincy sewer . . .

- The Quincy sewer, I worked down there too, interrupted Warty, never a man to miss boarding someone else's train of thought. - In the summer of 1962 it was, Séamus the Beast was the foreman, I never knew his real last name but he didn't really need one. No fear of having too much culture

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going on when he was around. As true as God, the man had no soul, at least not a human one . . . for example: his favorite lunch was sardines, and he'd eat them can and all if he couldn't get the little key to work fast enough. He'd buy his mother flowers for her birthday and then eat them when they started to wilt . . . he married a Mayo woman and left the sewer right after that. People said he actually learned to read a little while later, but he never bragged about it. Even his wife called him Beast, but fair play to her, she seemed to love him anyway, and he turned out to be a good husband and father after all . . . sure you can never tell.

The lads, Bunser included, had taken advantage of this latest of Warty's digressions to wet various whistles. Jimmy the bartender attended to the refills with his usual quiet efficiency.

- So then these people on stage start doing a sort of hornpipe, torches and all, continued Bunser from the point where he had left off. He was speaking in a stronger voice now, but it was plain he remained shaken by the experience. - Then something happened to the fountain and it grew a pair of wings and started to lift off the stage like Mahoney's prize gander at home. And in the meantime the Battle of the Bodhráns is continuing offstage, and I declare to God doesn't a platoon of bagpipers show up next, not marching but kind of ambling around in the mist and the smoke, and I couldn't swear that any two of them were playing the same tune. But of course with the bagpipes it's hard to tell . . .

The lads looked at one another with shaking heads and disbelief in their faces.

- And were there many people in the theatre? asked Paul the fireman, concerned from a professional standpoint by this first allusion to torches and candles.

- It was packed, replied Bunser in amazement. - You'd have needed a shoehorn to get anyone else in there. The son and his wife and the others

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all seemed to having a great time. But we didn't see anyone we knew from the session and the set dancing, that was the funny thing, maybe that should have tipped us off. And now, if you'll excuse me for a moment . . .

At the urging of irresistible personal necessity, Bunser left his stool for the first time since I had arrived in the pub. That left the opening we all feared.

- Speaking of bagpipes, I remember the night little Jackie Duggan, the lad from Glasgow, brought his bagpipes down into the sewer, said Warty. - He was just learning them and he thought he could practice down there to his heart's content, since Seamus the Beast had given him holy hell for bringing them when Jackie worked the day shift. Well the poor man forgot how far the stone tunnels and the water could carry that sound, "piercing" I think would be a good description . . . I was working down at the other end of town that night, three miles as the alligator swims - that's a little sewer humor - and I tell you I could hear what I think was supposed to be "Scotland the Brave" as clearly as I am listening to you all now. Lovely playing it was for someone who was still working on lesson 2 in the bagpipe tutor, but the Quincy police had to intervene when they started getting strange calls from houses overhead complaining about weird wailing sounds coming out of their bathrooms. When the sergeant and a couple of the lads came down to see what the hell was going on, Jackie had the good sense not to talk a lot, and he looked enough like an Irishman so that no charges were ever pressed, thanks be to God.

- I knew Jackie from the Somerville K of C, said Paul the fireman, and you know, now that I think about it, he often talked about the Celtics, but he said it with an 's' not a 'k', and they seemed to have more to do with football back in Scotland than with druids and torches and the like . . . funny thing was, when he talked about basketball he would say Keltics. Used to drive the guys at the hall crazy, and the more they tried to correct him, the more stubborn he got . . . Jackie used to take it out on them by practicing his pipes while they were trying to watch the games on TV. He

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stopped that only after Big Eddie Gleason threw a bowling ball at his head during a playoff game, in 1986 against the Lakers I think it was . . .

- God be with those times, said Mick Fahy reverently. His son-in-law had been a season ticket holder in the Boston Garden days.

Rooskey shook his head. - The bagpipes are not Keltic, he said in the firm voice of a man who had once owned a third-hand set of encyclopedias. - Not at all. They originated in . . . er . . . uh . . . in Patagonia. And no Patagonian was ever closer to Ireland than six or seven hundred miles, barring the lads who turned up in Clare a few years back for a hurling match, they still talk about that down there, the hospital in Ennis had to call in extra staff to tend the wounded. Any bagpipes in Ireland - barring the yooleean ones, which of course are our own, you only have to listen to Séamus Ennis or Willie Clancy to know that - are imported. Not Irish or even Keltic at all.

- But aren't the Scots Kelts? asked Paul the fireman. - I thought them and the Welsh and a few other tribes were all Kelts with us at one time or another . . .

All eyes turned to Rooskey, and the volume of smoke emerging from his pipe made it clear that some heavy pondering was taking place.

- Now I have it, he finally said, relieved. - It's as plain as the nose on your face. You're confusing Kelts and kilts. The Scots wear kilts all right but in my opinion they're too close to the Irish to be Keltic, one face one race type of thing. The Welsh, well now they could be another story altogether, hard folk to figure out sometimes, leeks and choral singing and rugby football, you wouldn't know what way to take them . . . but no question at all about our friends the Patagonians. No, indeed - they're not even close, no relationship at all.

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- Well then, said Bunser as he settled himself back on his stool, I know who to blame, and God spare any Patagonian I happen to cross paths with in the next few weeks.

Warty was about to launch another reminiscence, this one about someone he believed to be a Patagonian who had married his wife's second cousin, but mercifully Bunser cut him off.

- I'd appreciate it if you'd let me finish, Mr. O'Hara, he said. - I'm just getting to the good part.

- By all means, said Warty politely. - And I may say that I'm happy to see that you're convalescing well, sure sometimes talking about something horrible is the best way through it. Right, lads?

There was general agreement.

- Well, back to the Keltic experience, resumed Bunser. - By now the noise from those pipes was deafening. Then, thanks be, the pipers all disappeared and a lovely young girl came out with a harp. By now the fountain had landed again, and instead of wings it had antlers, not a word of a lie. The girl played and sang and I thought the poor thing had a speech impediment but she turned out to be the Welsh type of Keltic. Then when she finished, more drumming offstage and then twenty minutes of this kind of shaky music, it was like listening to somebody trying to play a trombone at the bottom of a swimming pool, and meantime some bosthoon in black tights is skipping around the fountain tossing things into it. I thought it was pieces of Spam, but the wife said they were holly leaves and would I ever shut up because you could hear my whispering all over the theater. I was going to answer back that nobody could hear anything with those godforsaken bodhráns belting away off stage, but then I thought the better of it . . . anyway with the smoke and the heat from the torches I must have fallen asleep because I woke up with the wife jabbing her elbow into my ribs, something about snoring . . . there were more people dressed in white

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on stage now, and they seemed to be kneeling down before a throne of some sort . . . the mist had really gotten thick, so it was hard to know what was going on, they were chanting about Druids and mistletoe and the High King and Tara . . . then more torches, and more drums, and then something about a sacrifice, and sweet jayzus didn't they drag a live ox out on stage, and it bellowing and as unhappy as I was to be there . . . well as God is my judge I suddenly thought I was going to have to throw up. I gasped some excuse to the wife, ran out of the theater as fast as I could, stopped ten seconds to breathe some fresh air, grabbed a taxi, and you know the rest of the unhappy tale. The wife got a ride home with the kids and hasn't spoken to me since.

There was a moment of awed silence.

- So is that what Keltic means? asked Mick Fahy. He seemed disappointed. - By Heaven you'd never mistake it for Irish. But why would anyone lay out money for that sort of carry-on? Flying fountains and live oxen and blatant bodhrán abuse, at the Wang Center no less so you know it wasn't cheap . . .

- But maybe they can charge big money for "Keltic" and get away with it because ninety-nine percent of the audience doesn't know any better, suggested Paul the fireman, always the practical member of the group.

- Sad but probably true, said Bunser. - And maybe the night got better later on, but somehow I doubt it. I wouldn't have bet too much money that you'd be seeing a piano accordion or a plain Clare set, or be hearing any good jokes that you'd want to write down to remember them . . . I'll know more when I talk to the wife in three or four days, but as I say, it didn't look good. And Jimmy, speaking of the wife . . . did we fix up that little matter I was talking to you about before?

- It's all set, Bunser, not a bit of worry, said Jimmy the bartender soothingly. - I talked to Danny Finn a few minutes ago and he says you're

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welcome to sleep in the back room as long as you have to, just don't mind the cats, he says they have a job to do, heh-heh . . .

- A Keltic spectacle, not good indeed, said Rooskey. - In fact it sounds deadly altogether, I wonder if there were any Patagonians involved. In my opinion you did right to leave, Bunser, although with all due respect to your lovely wife and knowing her as I do, not to say being related distantly to her through marriages of one sort and another, I'd say it took uncommon bravery to do so . . .

- She was . . . not happy, bless her Dublin heart, said Bunser with a sigh. - I'll make it up to them all some day . . . Nora guessed I'd wind up here and she called to make sure I was okay. I'll tell the wife that the smoke and the noise temporarily affected my sanity and my digestion at the same time. That might work - she still talks about the flight to Ireland when I had a little too much white wine before dinner and made a right fool of myself with one of the stewardesses . . . my wife was furious at the time but the tone is generally sympathetic now, she's had thirty-four years to soften up a bit . . .

- And you'd wonder how you could have a proper show without anyone singing "Moonlight in Mayo", asked Warty rhetorically. - That was Seamus the Beast's favorite song, at least after he started courting herself, he could make the sewer walls vibrate with that powerful voice of his, not a rat to be seen for miles. Too bad he couldn't carry a tune, but he was a fierce man at unclogging a suction valve, I remember one time after a heavy fall of rain when . . .

The End