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The March rain beat down relentlessly outside the bar. It was the in-between time; just Jimmy the bartender and Kevin the fireman were there when I came in, dripping wet of course (Kathleen had as usual taken the family umbrella). Rooskey, one of the regulars, came in shortly after I did and headed right for his usual seat, ordering his usual pint. There were greetings all around.

Dark as it was outside, the interior of the bar seemed even darker, at least until your eyes became accustomed to the dim light. Then you slowly began to sense a great deal of green, thinking perhaps that it was a lot more than necessary, until eventually you remembered that St. Patrick's Day was only a few days away. After a few more minutes, you noticed the cardboard shamrocks that had been carefully revived from their year-long sleep in the dusty cellar, been given a quick wipe with a damp bar cloth, and were now thumb-tacked in any and every location within the reach of a six-three bartender standing on a bar stool with one shaky leg.

A profusion of limp green balloons lay on the bar ready to be inflated. Nearby were a half-dozen rolls of green-white-and-orange crepe paper and four or five objects constructed of aluminum foil which were meant to suggest harps. An Erin Go Bragh banner was dangling uncertainly over the till awaiting the arrival of Rory the night bartender, who I was led to believe had volunteered to pick up some scotch tape on his way into work.

As I sat down at the bar, Jimmy the bartender put down his hammer (not reluctantly) and leaned over to shake hands. This unusual action was merited by the fact that I had been out of town on an extended business trip and hadn't been in the place for a while. Kevin the fireman and Rooskey nodded and smiled in recognition of my safe return. Compliments passed, and I ordered a shot of Jameson's for myself and a round for the other two.

- Fierce day out there today, Mr. B., said Jimmy. I haven't seen it rain like this since I left my home town of Ballinamuck in the sweet County Longford years ago. There'll be thousands drowned in the streets of Boston if it doesn't let up soon.

- And in July the city fathers will be ready to indict and imprison you if you dare to flush your toilet more than the approved number of times, said Rooskey disgustedly. I hope to heaven that some of this stuff is falling on the places that can hold onto it for us until the hot weather comes.

After more or less general condemnation of the Boston climate, we began discussion of the decorating job in progress. Jimmy felt strongly that it was a superfluous pain in the neck and far below the dignity of his calling. However, since Danny Finn, his wife's cousin, seemed to think - with a force of conviction and moral certainty that derived from the unpleasant but inescapable fact that he owned the bar - that decorating for St. Patrick's Day was something his American

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patrons not only expected, but would be insulted not to find, the extra work for Jimmy and Rory was inevitable.

- I think I hate those damned leprechauns worst of all, Mr. B., Jimmy confided. There's something about their lunatic little smiling faces and all their green little clothes that honest to God brings out the very basest aspects of my nature. I remember last year I got into such a state over them that I had to have several blackberry brandies one right after the other before I could even bring myself to look at them. I hadn't had a drink in weeks before that, so I guess it won't come as a surprise to find out that by the time I decided to get on with the decorating job, I was what you might call...well, "sobriety challenged" I guess is pretty accurate. I don't know to this day how I managed in that condition to get up on a barstool - by that stage I couldn't even spell ladder, much less find one in the cellar - loaded with hammers and tacks and nails and tape and all that malarkey, and then manage to hang up every last foul little leprechaun without killing myself in the process, You know, I was never a big believer in the powers of the Miraculous Medal, but I just happened to be wearing one that day. You can bet the rent that it never leaves my neck now.

- You know, Jimmy, I remember talking to Danny Finn a week or so after the day, said Kevin the fireman. He told me an interesting story that might make you even more of a believer in the Miraculous Medal, since it seems that only a divine power of some sort could have intervened to keep him from murdering you with his bare hands, not once but several times and more gruesomely each time.

- Tell us about this now, said Rooskey, carefully folding his Herald and moving a few stools closer in anticipation of the intelligence that was to follow. I never heard this before, and it sounds interesting.

- Well, began Kevin the fireman, as I got it from Danny Finn, he arrived here at the bar at around nine-thirty that St. Pat's morning, ready willing and able for the busiest day of the year, with a party of twenty-five male and female accountants from some high-class firm due promptly at one o'clock for their annual corned beef and cabbage lunch. However, the first thing he notices when he opens the door is not a light on. Second thing, you stretched out snoring on the bar. He told me you had your shirt on backwards and your pants had slipped down, showing a lovely half-moon to the world. There was a horrible pukey smell all over the place, the source of which seemed to be a pizza lying in a corner over behind the jukebox, but it was too dark to tell for sure. Then, just about the time he realized how tragically wrong he had been the true nature of the material behind the jukebox, he noticed all the leprechauns ... he claims that he actually blacked out for a few seconds, the result maybe of a kind of overload to his senses. He states as a fact that there isn't a sane person on the face of the earth who would have been able to view the condition of that bar without some kind of short circuit.

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- Ah sure, how was I to blame at all, Mr. Reilly? asked Jimmy as we all chuckled at Kevin the fireman's deadpan account. **Those blackberry brandies had completely hijacked any intellect I had. I didn't know what I was doing ... begod Danny Finn should at least have given me credit for trying.**

- Well, Jimmy, in a way he did give you credit, said Kevin the fireman. **I'd have to say that there was a certain ... admiration in his voice as he described the situation in the bar that morning. He told me it probably hadn't been easy for you to hang every last leprechaun upside-down. And more marvellous than that, he said - although he might not have said it exactly that way - was what he called your "artistry". I remember he kind of sobbed when he said that word. Apparently you had managed to stick red thumbtacks square in the middle of their little blue eyeballs, and then you did something to the leprechauns involving melted red wax, and there were other mutilations that he wouldn't even describe ... to be honest, I didn't want him to continue, because he was getting paler by the second and I thought for sure he was going to pass out. But I let him catch his breath for a few minutes. When he started speaking again, his whole voice had changed to something low and ominous. He said that on that day of infamy - he actually used that expression - for the first time in his life he literally didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so he did both, at the same time. In spite of everything, he told me, you were still sound asleep and obviously blissfully unaware of the situation, so out of sheer frustration he poured a pitcher of ice water down your shirt and screamed names at you, names he admitted were not normally used by Christian gentlemen to refer to one another. He said he was on the point of hitting you repeatedly over the head with the cold, empty pot in which you were supposed to have started the day's cabbage boiling, but he was afraid he'd do some harm to the pot and it was the only one he had.**

- I remember the ice water and the screaming, said Jimmy uncomfortably, **but as god is my judge I remember nothing about those damned leprechauns ... tacks through their eyeballs? Jayzus Moloney, I must have been in a bad way altogether.**

- Well, you did such a memorable job on them with your tacks and nails and hot wax and barbed wire and what-all that you managed to scare every last leprechaun right out of this bar, said Kevin the fireman. **And the long and the short of it is that Danny Finn doesn't trust you to retain your sanity in their presence, so this establishment will most likely be the only bar in the city that will not be graced by a single horrible leprechaun over Saint Patrick's Day.**

- You know, said Jimmy glancing around the bar, **I never even noticed till now that Danny Finn didn't pester us to put them up this year.**

- Well, now you know the reason, said Kevin the fireman. **And with all due respect to yourself, I can't say that I blame Danny Finn one little bit. Strange and deviant leprechauns might play well in other parts of town, but this has always been a**

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decent bar and he wants to keep it that way.

The door of the bar had opened and closed quickly during the latter part of Kevin the fireman's account, and Eddie Burke could be seen standing off to the side of the room hanging up his raincoat. He was a retired New York City detective, supposedly one of the best in his day, who had come to live with his widowed sister in West Roxbury after his own wife had passed away. He was an excellent flute player, and was one of the mainstays of the Monday night traditional music session held in the bar. Being like Jimmy from County Longford, but from a town on the other side of the county that was Ballinamuck's fiercest football rival, Eddie Burke saw it his duty to make Jimmy's life as pleasantly miserable as possible at every opportunity. In reality he loved Jimmy like a son, but would have preferred to have his fingernails nibbled away by ferrets to having Jimmy aware of his feelings.

- Leprechauns, is it? said Eddie Burke as he wiped the rain off his glasses with a napkin. *Indeed I should have known that you'd be talking about our good Jimmy's favorite topic with the big day so close. And Jimmy, did you share with the company assembled the reason for your aversion to the poor harmless creatures, a big Longford bosthoon like yourself who could carry a Volkswagen Beetle the length of Commonwealth Avenue and never even think about stopping for a rest until you were well past Porter Square? Is it you, Jimmy Doyle, the fearless boyo who stuck his knee into the pelvic area of a highly-respected Monsignor the day of the charity football game and then threatened the referee's wife and children when he blew the whistle on you, while the poor prelate was writhing in agony along the sideline? Is it the Jimmy who almost got into trouble with the F.B.I. for his efforts to stuff a live wriggling mugger into a mailbox in Jamaica Plain? I ask you, friends, why wouldn't he be afraid of leprechauns?*

- Ah cripes, Eddie Burke, said Jimmy with a pained look, *spare us all the oratory ...s ure all of that stuff about my leprephobia or whatever you'd call it is old news by now. Right, lads?*

No one at the bar - now including the Fahey twins, the Bunser Quinn, and Knuckles Delaney, all of whom had entered the bar in respectful silence in the midst of Eddie Burke's opening remarks - gave Jimmy the answer he was so desperately searching. The significance of this refusal was not lost on Eddie Burke.

- Not old news, Jimmy my thousand treasures, not old news at all. Rather a never-ending story with a fine moral, a parable you might say, edifying to all fortunate enough to hear...

- Merciful Heaven! muttered Jimmy. *You'd think I was the Prodigal Son or Mary Magdalen or someone of that stature instead of a hardworking Boston bartender*

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who just happens to ... well, to hate leprechauns. On you go, continue your homily, your reverence - I have work to do if you don't mind.

He grabbed the bar rag and slouched down to the shadowy end of the bar to correct some imaginary impropriety, humming loudly but tunelessly as he did so.

- So we are to hear the truth of this strange matter from you in the near future, Eddie Burke? Momentarily perhaps? one of the Faheys asked.

- Sweet Mother Machree, here we go again, sighed a tired voice nearly drowned out by the noise of a rapidly-flopping bar rag, the speed of which was always considered by the regulars as an accurate indicator of Jimmy's annoyance level.

- You will of course, said Eddie Burke, whereupon a soft but distinct groan was heard from a Jimmy now busily engaged in making some sort of unneeded adjustment to the sink. *But it's rather a long story, so let me indulge in a mouthful of this health-giving liquid before I proceed. And I might suggest to our friend down there in the shadows that the same all around would I think be appreciated, that is when he finds the time to desist from his plumbing attempts.*

The requested refills having been produced by a Jimmy tunelessly whistling to demonstrate his utter lack of interest in the proceedings, Eddie Burke began his story.

Well, lads, some years ago a young man of our acquaintance arrived in this great country from the thriving metropolis of Ballinamuck in the midlands of Ireland. He was anxious like most young Irishmen to settle in a part of America that reminded him least of his birthplace, so our hero - let's call him Timmy - soon found his way, naturally enough, to the Bronx. At the time of Timmy's arrival this part of New York City was bursting with Irish, which Timmy liked, but of course it bore no resemblance to Timmy's home town, which was another thing he liked.

At first he lived with twelve other young adventurers in an apartment originally designed to hold four people comfortably. This palace was furnished with one bed, a couch that no respectable insect would have gone anywhere near, a battered kitchen table with a top that looked like brown formica - it had, you suspected, a certain food value of its own - and two vaguely matching chairs with torn pink cushions and uncertain legs. But of these opulent furnishings Timmy knew or cared little, since he only used the apartment for sleeping and that mostly in the bathtub (not used, I might add, for any other purpose, except occasionally in July or August). When Timmy was awake, he was usually involved with sheetrock in one way or another, and when he wasn't working - which was frequently - he spent his time bouncing between the pleasure domes of the Bronx

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trying to surpass the world record for the highest blood alcohol level ever maintained by a living organism. During those periods when the sheetrock business had gone really slack and a financial crisis was looming for him, Timmy would work at odd jobs around the city, hard dirty futureless jobs that left him dead tired physically and spiritually. Between the dogwork and the drink, Timmy had little time for reflection; for example, it wasn't until the end of his third year in America that he arrived at the dim realization that none of the friendly lads serving him drinks in his favorite haunts were investment counselors building up his retirement portfolio. By this time Timmy had met a girl, you see, and she had tried to talk some sense into him. Unfortunately, however, her mother took sick, and she had to rush back to Ireland ... when she couldn't come back to America, Timmy's dolce vita took up where it had left off.

Eddie Burke paused to moisten his throat.

- Would you lads like some music? asked Jimmy abruptly. We just got some Clancy Brothers re-issue stuff on the jukebox yesterday, CD's no less, all high tech. Great stuff that, more entertaining than Eddie Burke's old chatter anytime. You know - "There was a wild colonial boy, da dum dum was his name..."

In all probability Jimmy would have continued manifesting his total lack of musical aptitude had not Kevin the fireman mercifully intervened.

- Enough of that now, Jimmy, for heaven's sake, he said impatiently. It seems to me that this moment is not the appropriate one for a sing-song, and I for one would like Eddie Burke to continue his little ... parable did you call it, Mr. Burke?

Other heads nodded encouragement. Eddie Burke took a long drink in preparation for continuing the story, while Jimmy, keenly sensing the failure of his diversionary tactic, announced to no one in particular his intention to go into the back of the bar to "check something".

- So here's our Timmy in the Bronx where we left him, resumed Eddie Burke, and not ten dollars or pounds or anything else to his name, his girl gone back to Ireland probably never to return, no real friends but instead a collection of foggy faces and uncertain names, still doing odd jobs, and worse still the landlord of the apartment had now thrown them all out. Seems he had come up one evening to see what all the other tenants of the building had been complaining about, discovered to his surprise that their complaints had been justified, and had then ordered all the brave Gaels in apartment 6-D to vacate immediately, poor Timmy asleep in the bathtub and everyone. When somebody - probably not one of the Irishmen - asked the landlord the reason for the expulsion, he explained that the rent for that apartment hadn't been paid in over six months, which knowing that sort of crowd was undoubtedly true with room to spare. A cousin of mine who lives in that same building told me later that immediately after the exodus from 6-

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D, the landlord had a big new deadbolt lock installed on the door, then the following week sent in a team of fumigators, painters, and public health professionals to try to get poor old 6-D in liveable condition again, but even after all that no one he showed it to expressed any interest in renting. When one of his other Irish tenants suggested tongue-in-cheek that perhaps an exorcism was in order, the landlord - an Orthodox Jew - didn't take it as a joke, and asked for the phone number of the nearest rectory. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall the next night when he called to discuss the matter with Father Donnelly. I knew the priest well - a fierce Clareman with a good heart but almost no sense of humor and probably less Yiddish.

- Not a language you'd find in Clare, at least not in the day, said Knuckles. My late wife's brother-in-law was from there, and he could barely speak English.

By the way, said Eddie Burke resuming the story of Timmy, my cousin said that there were rumors circulating in the laundry room that the super was still finding empty beer cans - fresh empty beer cans - in 6-D months after the Great Eviction, so maybe the exorcism idea wasn't so far-fetched after all. But I always wonder if the landlord had remembered to check the lock on the fire escape window...

In any event, it was now late February, and a hard cold winter it was that year too. The other ex-inmates of the infamous apartment 6-D had all drifted off into other living arrangements - I use the term loosely - but our Timmy, always having been something of a loner, had limited success in finding another place to keep warm. Fair play to him, he had enough self-respect left to want to find someplace that didn't involve bus stations or subway gratings, but otherwise his options were limited.

Finally, in a lucid moment, he recalled once doing some sheetrock work in a restaurant in midtown, a classy place called Aidan McCann's where his cousin Joe tended bar occasionally. With this in mind, Timmy figured he'd bid a fond if temporary farewell to the Bronx and seek his fortune - or at least a warm place to sleep - in Manhattan, as many had done before him. After that, well, he'd see what his future held in store. He sensed that in any case his future couldn't be much more unpleasant than his present.

At that point a little union job came Timmy's way, and after spending a delightful nine hours out in the cold and wet filling potholes on the Grand Concourse - his first day's work in almost a month - Timmy was exhausted but optimistic when he finally arrived at Aidan McCann's later that evening. However, he soon found out that Saturday was his cousin Joe's night off (bad news), but that Brian the duty bartender's grandparents had emigrated to America years before from Timmy's very own Ballinamuck (good news, very good news).

By this time it was around ten o'clock and beginning to snow and blow for further

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orders outside, so our Timmy was playing the Ballinamuck card for all it was worth. As it happened, Brian the bartender turned out to be a bit of a character in his own way: he poured drinks for Timmy all night, got him a sizeable sandwich from somewhere, and would take no payment for anything. As the evening passed and the weather continued to deteriorate, there was almost nobody else left in the bar to notice that no money was changing hands, but Timmy suspected it wouldn't have made any difference to Brian anyway.

Timmy was genuinely grateful for Brian's kindness, even if it meant having to listen to lengthy expositions of Brian's spiritual beliefs, which seemed to emphasize mystical experiences and eternal punishments and was apparently loosely based on some of the more obscure poetical efforts of W.B. Yeats and a few other lads that Timmy had never heard of. Friendly and generous as Brian was, Timmy was getting quite sleepy and wished that Brian would shut up or at least change the subject, but with a captive audience at hand, Brian volunteered to do neither. Finally Timmy decided that he'd have to hit Brian with a cucumber, or maybe take a big bite out of the bar, and then when he'd gotten Brian to stop talking, Timmy could tell him ... tell him ... sheetrock and sugar and shingles ... ?

Eddie Burke, satisfied that his listeners had followed him closely to this mysterious point in the saga of Timmy, paused and took a long drink from his refilled pint. There was respectful silence as he searched his pockets for pipe and tobacco, until finally one of the Faheys spoke.

- Eddie Burke, you mentioned I believe that this ... exposition of yours would shed light on our friend Jimmy's great dislike, hatred might not be too strong a word, for the leprechaun species?

- I did and it will, Mick Fahey, replied Eddie Burke. More will be revealed as soon as I get the old steam-engine here fired up.

As soon as he had become nearly invisible in a dense cloud of cocoa-smelling smoke, Eddie Burke produced from the inner pocket of his waistcoat a small leather notebook, whose venerable look suggested that it was a remnant from his earliest NYPD detective days.

- Up to this point, you have heard Timmy's story as I was able to piece it together from interviews with third parties, said Eddie Burke. However, the best way of continuing the story from here out would be to recount what happened next in Jimmy's - beg pardon, I mean Timmy's - own words. You'll find out later how I managed to assemble this information.

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There was no way of knowing for sure, but it seemed to several of the listeners that at that moment, the big shadowy shape ostensibly watching "CSI Miami" at the far end of the bar moved backwards a step or two in Eddie Burke's direction as he consulted his notebook and prepared to continue his narrative.

- I must have collapsed in the bar (Timmy told me) because the next thing I remember was opening my eyes, and surely to God I was not in the bar any more. I was awake in an instant ... who wouldn't be? There was darkness all around me, then flames. I became conscious of a horrible screaming noise, and unbelievable heat. Then I realized that I was flat on my back, and begod there were snakes all over my body, dozens of them, I could feel them slithering around...I wanted to jump up and run, but I couldn't - one of my legs was paralyzed! And as if all that wasn't bad enough, I could see once my eyes got used to the crazy light that there were creatures of some kind standing around me, sort of hiding in the darkness behind the flames. I couldn't tell what they were doing, and maybe I didn't want to know, but every time I heard that horrible screeching noise, the creatures would start to sway back and forth. It was like a sort of...of ritual, centered around me. One of the snakes rubbed against my face, I remember now that it was dry and not slimy, but at that moment I neither knew nor cared and I nearly got sick to my stomach. I was never so terrified in my entire life. I closed my eyes and told the good Lord that I would be new man from then on if He'd help me get out of there...at that moment the thought flashed through my mind of my poor mother lighting candles for me in our parish church back home, and I was determined to get far away from that unholy place I was in and not be any part of whatever was going on. Paralyzed leg or not, I was getting out of there.

I tensed all my muscles, gave a fierce kick, and my leg was moving again! In one-tenth of a second I was on my feet. The snakes disappeared, and I wanted to run, but I hesitated when I remembered that I had no idea where I was or where I wanted to go, except out of there. In the dark and confusion, I tripped over something ... oh dear God! The creatures must have noticed me trying to escape - one of them had me by the belt and with incredible strength kept trying to pull me back towards the flames. I struggled to my feet again and tried to fight off the clinging creature while I ran screaming towards what looked like a stairway a few yards away. But the damnable thing wouldn't let go! I ran stumbling up the stairs, still screaming and cursing at the top of my lungs, and flung myself towards the doorway at the top. I didn't care what was on the other side, because surely to heaven it couldn't have been any worse than where I was. I kicked the door open, and as soon as I did I saw a blinding white light, and I raced for it with that vicious bastard of a demon still hanging on to me. Now I heard more screaming, different screaming, and I thought jayzus the whole pack are after me now! when here right on top of me is a big tall ghostly one of them waving around a huge pitchfork, and right behind him I could make out a body on a spit, all bloody and dripping ... God help you, whoever you are, thought I to myself, but I have no intention of keeping you company now or any other time. After that I started to get really angry, but I

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was still very scared, and then somehow I managed to knock the big white demon with the pitchfork ass over teakettle, and there was more yelling...sweet mother, it was awful, and I can assure you that terrified comes no closer to describing how I felt at that moment than rabbit poop comes to caviar.

I was still running full tilt away from the pack of them, little demons and big demons, when like an idiot I turned around to see how close behind me they were ... then I remember something very solid and very sudden, and stars, and pretty colors, and a sense of everything stopping. Next thing I remember is waking up in an ambulance going very fast with its siren blasting away. I was hurting all over, and I seemed to have lots of blood on my face.

There was a huge black cop sitting next to me with his hand on top of mine, a big hand but a gentle one, telling me that everything would be okay. I recall too that there was another cop, maybe two, in the ambulance, and that they all seemed to have tears in their eyes and were making little coughing noises, and I was thinking that it was really nice of them to be so sympathetic ... then I got scared again, and shouted out something about the demon and the snake, but the big cop said not to worry, everything was okay, and I believed him, and they all started coughing and wiping their eyes again just before I fell back to sleep ...

Eddie Burke closed his notebook and carefully placed it back in his pocket, then paused for a long drink. - And that's the story, lads, just as I had it from first person singular over there. The reason himself can't look a leprechaun in the face to this very day.

There was a small silence as the listeners tried to put the pieces together and extract the moral that Eddie Burke had intended. Finally Kevin the fireman spoke for the group.

- Two or three points we might be not clear on, Mr. Burke. Perhaps some further explanations are in order?

- With pleasure, Mr. Reilly, said Eddie Burke amiably. You will all have an easier time comprehending the nature of young James' mystical experience after I have shared the results of some of my detective labors with you. But permit me first to refresh my inspiration a bit.

- Refreshment, an excellent idea, said Kevin the fireman lifting his glass. After which you may share away when ready.

- However, gentlemen, I fear I require a brief moment to do something none of you can do for me, said Eddie Burke standing slowly up from his stool. The day's lesson will resume on my return. And Jimmy, will you for heaven's sake stop trying to save Danny Finn's money and turn on some lights in this catacomb?

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What there was of daylight has disappeared hours ago. Soon we'll be needing seeing-eye dogs to guide us to the men's room in here.

Jimmy complied in silence. It almost seemed as if he hadn't noticed the gloom until it was pointed out to him.

Conversation among the regulars remained at a minimum until Eddie Burke returned. After a nice long stretch, he arranged himself comfortably on his stool, graciously delaying resumption of his narration until a few of the others had completed the same pilgrimage he had just made. When all were back and seated, Eddie Burke re-lit his pipe and again began speaking.

- Now, it will come as no surprise to you that our boy had indeed fallen asleep abruptly but soundly on the restaurant bar soon after the "shingles" and "sheetrock" insights. At that point Brian the kindly bartender, who had gathered from the evening's conversation the fact that our hero was more or less homeless, remembered a seldom-used but serviceable cot in the restaurant's furnace room and somehow managed to get all six-foot-three-inches of Jimmy - to give our hero his proper name - downstairs to take advantage of it.

By the time Brian had closed the bar and left for home, it was close to three-thirty in the morning. The snow had stopped, but the cold wind still howled through the canyons of Manhattan. Of these things, however, Jimmy knew and cared nothing; he was warm and snug and sound asleep in McCann's basement.

Aidan McCann's place changed hands shortly after I retired and came up here to Boston - I understand it's a Korean restaurant now. In the days of which we speak, however, it was famous all over Manhattan for its Sunday brunch, always well-attended, reservations a good idea - a lot of the late Mass crowd from Saint Patrick's used to go to McCann's religiously, excuse the bit of humor.

Speaking of that, it seems that our friend Brian, the bartender with the peculiar beliefs, turned out to be more of a true Christian than a good many people who like to refer to themselves by that term. He had left in Jimmy's shirt pocket a note to McCann's day manager telling him about some bogus odd job that Jimmy had done the previous night, and asking that Jimmy be allowed to have a meal the next day with the kitchen staff. There was another note too, with a twenty-dollar bill stapled to it, giving Jimmy the address of an esoteric bookstore - yes, a bookstore - where Brian thought Jimmy might find steady work. Unfortunately Jimmy knew nothing of either the notes or the cash, and they were still on the floor of the furnace room when I went back to investigate a few days later.

Of course, that meant that Jimmy, even if he had awakened under normal

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circumstances, could have had no idea of what was going on in the restaurant upstairs.

- Clear to that point, Eddie Burke, said one of the Faheys. Thanks very much. And God grant Brian the rosicrucian bartender a long and happy life for his kindness. But there's more light to be shed on this peculiar matter by yourself, I'm sure, so please accept my apologies for interrupting.

- There is indeed more light to be shed, friend Peter, said Eddie Burke as he packed his pipe, and I think not a man here would blame me for continuing the exegesis, as you may call it.

- They would not, said Peter Fahey after a glance at the others. Let the exegesis continue.

- Being in my opinion persons of uncommon intelligence, resumed Eddie Burke, you have doubtless begun to figure out for yourselves the explanations for many of the elements of Jimmy's vision. For example: flames, heat, produced by furnace; screeching noise, produced by worn bearing in the furnace blower fan; darkness, inherent property of furnace rooms. The leg paralysis was the result of a shoelace being caught in a cot hinge - I recovered a piece of the lace when I went to McCann's to check out our hero's strange story.

- Snakes, Mr. Burke? Demonic creatures? Rituals? queried the Bunsen, who seemed concerned that he had missed the point where vision ceased and reality began.

*- As easily explained, said Eddie Burke, if you are aware of the fact that the furnace room was also used as a storage room, mostly for paraphernalia of the pseudo-Celtic Saint Patrick's Day variety. So: what the terrified Jimmy believed were snakes crawling on his body were actually festive streamers and ribbons that had been dislodged by Brian moving the cot around the night before. They had drifted down on Jimmy as he slept, and were regularly set in motion every time that the fan went on or whenever there was a breeze of some sort. The fearsome fanged snake that gripped him during his headlong flight upstairs was of course a streamer of some sort that had gotten attached to his sock during the *melée*.*

When I went back to McCann's to check the furnace room, I noticed that most of the streamers were equipped with safety pins for attaching them to the draperies. My guess is that the pin on Jimmy's streamer was open, had caught on his sock or pants leg, and pricked him a few times as he ran. I know there was dried blood on his ankle when they examined him at the hospital.

- Might the so-called "demonic creatures" be what I think they are? asked

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Roskey.

- I wouldn't doubt it, said Eddie Burke, and you're one hundred percent correct if you guessed that the creatures were in reality a dozen or so cardboard leprechauns of varying sizes and shapes. They had been removed from storage by some of the restaurant staff, cleaned, and hung up on a kind of clothesline in the furnace room to dry.

Their "ritual dance" - and Jimmy here is the only human ever to have witnessed it and lived - was performed to the very mundane rhythms of the noisy blower fan: when it started, they started, and when it stopped, they stopped. You couldn't expect much more from cardboard cutouts, but of course Jimmy didn't have a clue about that.

- But what about the clinging demon? persisted the worried Bunser. Begod I get chills up my spine when I think of it.

- The exact mechanics of the situation are hard to reconstruct, said Eddie Burke, but my guess is that when Jimmy stumbled during his escape attempt, he pulled one of the leprechauns off the clothesline and somehow managed to get it hooked on his belt. There are little metal hooks all over them so they can be hung in any position. It was natural for Jimmy in his panic state to think that the "creature" had grabbed him, not the other way round.

- Eddie Burke, I beg your pardon for interrupting, but I have a strange and wonderful thing to tell you, said Knuckles Delaney, who up to that point had been wordlessly absorbing Eddie Burke's story. I don't blame you for not believing this, but as god is my judge, my wife's nephew Jerry Doran - you know him, Bunser, sure didn't you get him his first job here with the gas company, skinny lad that played the harmonica and raised rabbits in his back garden? - anyway this same Jerry's first job when he came out to America from Galway was bussing tables in that very McCann's restaurant where this all happened. And a week or so after he started didn't the manager tell Jerry he'd be working a Sunday brunch, and he like a big greenhorn had no idea what "brunch" was and didn't want to show his ignorance by asking ... Jerry said he guessed it might be an Indian word like "tomahawk" or "wigwam", except that he never remembered hearing it in any of the Western movies he had seen back home in Galway.

But bedam he came to work that Sunday ready for anything, or maybe I should say almost anything. He told me he hadn't been there for ten minutes before there was a huge crash, and next thing this lunatic comes howling and screaming out of the basement with a cardboard leprechaun hanging on to him, and green streamers and ribbons dangling behind ... Jerry said he could never in his life have imagined a scene like that, with half the people in the crowded restaurant hysterical laughing and the other half fainting with terror. He said it took the whole

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staff hours to clean up the mess, they even had to call people in on their day off to help. You know, Eddie Burke, it's many the time we laughed over that story, Jerry's one of the few on the wife's side has any sense of humor at all, and here I never had any idea at all that our own Jimmy was the star of that particular show ... that's well worth a call to Jerry, he's down in Florida now, but I bet he won't believe me.

- The good Knuckles is right, said the Bunser, banging his fist on the bar for emphasis. I remember Jerry often telling that story on the job, and grown men who hadn't heard it, or not more than three or four times anyway, would pee themselves like tiny helpless infants with the laughter. But in the end you couldn't help feeling a little sorry for all those poor sods in McCann's trying to enjoy their meal. They must have been mortified when our apparition here came screaming into their lives. I know yours truly would have been, without a doubt.

- Indeed they were, said Eddie Burke. The ones that could still talk told the police later that Jimmy, who was lying right across the entrance out cold and covered with blood, had missed the exit by a good three feet and had smacked head-first into a marble pillar. Everybody was in an uproar, and no one could decide whether or not to remove Jimmy's little ... attachments. Most people were worried that if they left the things dangling, Jimmy might wake up, see them, and go off into the screaming meemies again, and there was general agreement that that eventuality was to be avoided at all costs.

But then somebody else, probably a lawyer or maybe one of the patrolmen, said something about "tampering with evidence", so they decided to leave everything as it was. The detectives who arrived a few minutes later didn't know what to make of it either and spent most of the next hour milling around drinking coffee and taking statements from anyone coherent, and sort of hoping that the ambulance would soon be showing up. In the meantime Jimmy was blissfully unconscious, banged up a bit but still breathing.

Finally the EMTs did arrive, and when the very businesslike woman in charge announced that evidence or not, the goddam leprechaun would have to come off or else Jimmy wouldn't fit properly into the ambulance, Jimmy and his smiling green nemesis finally parted company. The leprechaun was unscathed, and he and his pals the snakes probably celebrated St. Patrick's Day in great style, but unfortunately the same could not have been truthfully said about Jimmy. By the way, did I explain that the ghostly white demon with the pitchfork that Jimmy collided with was one of the buffet chefs, and that the poor sinner he saw being tortured was a really nice steamship round of beef? The owners of McCann's gave me a sinner sandwich the next day when I came around to ask a few questions. Adulterer au jus - it was delicious.

- I recall that you came to visit me at the hospital that evening, although I didn't

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recall ever having met you, murmured Jimmy, who had more or less imperceptibly rejoined the group of listeners during the course of Eddie Burke's discourse. And I recall you asking me questions about what had happened. I was still scared as all hell, but you seemed friendly, and that knock I took hadn't affected my memory. As I told you the story, you wrote in a little notebook like you read from just now, and then you left. But I never remembered to ask how you knew about my ... adventures.

- Well, for that you can thank a lady named Maura Kelly, Eddie Burke replied. You didn't know her, but she was a nurse in your hospital, a decent lady from Drumlish, not far as you know from your own beloved home town of Ballinamuck. But she could talk the stripes off a full-grown zebra. She used to sit with Brigid - my late wife, God rest her - at St. Raymond's bingo every Tuesday, and between games this night she happened to mention to Brigid about the nice young Longford boy that had arrived on her floor of the hospital under mysterious circumstances involving demons and snakes and God knows what-all, what are the young people of today getting themselves into, nothing's been the same since they landed on the moon, I think his granduncle married my husband's brother's godmother, et cetera et cetera.

Well, after about a half hour of this kind of thing from Maura, my wife eventually figured out that someone from home needed help in the big city. Bless her kind soul, she could never in her life refuse to help anyone or anything in trouble, so she suggested - I use the word cautiously - that since I had just retired from the force and now had quote plenty of time on my hands unquote, I might like to keep my detective skills sharp (her words) by looking into your story. By that time the hospital chaplain - Father Pat Dunne, we used to play football together in Gaelic Park - and a couple of the other nurses had also called asking me to help, so I couldn't refuse even if I had wanted to.

I was pleasantly suprised by the cooperation I got from the hospital staff , and soon with the help of my brother - he's a solicitor in Kilkenny - I made contact with your family. They had received some kind of official notification from the hospital about your accident, but it provided no details, and they were worried sick. They were getting ready to have their parish priest call the hospital when they heard from my brother, and I don't have to tell you how happy and relieved they were to have the assistance of someone they thought they could trust. By the way, Jimmy, in talking to your family later, I found out that the priest that married Brigid and me forty years ago was related to your mother in some way.

Anyway, I was now obligated to a lot of good people to try and find out exactly what had transpired on that weekend, and with a little luck and some judicious snooping I managed to piece together the explanation you have all been hearing. The only big problem I had was in convincing the owners of the restaurant - a bullheaded pair of Corkmen, God be kind to them, and neither one named Aidan

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McCann - to let me re-create the infamous "ritual dance of the leprechauns" in their furnace room. They looked at me as if I had a slate or two missing, until finally I flashed the tin (it said "retired" on it somewhere, but they didn't look that closely) and persuaded them that it was a police matter. It's amazing how quiet it was in the kitchen while I was downstairs snooping - there probably wasn't a green card in the whole place!

- I can't be sure, Eddie Burke, said Knuckles Delaney in an offended tone, but that sounds like it may be a sort of insinuation against my wife's nephew Jerry, you recall I mentioned earlier that he was working in McCann's at the time. If indeed it is, I wish to make clear to all here present that Jerry's own father was born right here in Boston, on Dorchester Avenue to be exact, and according to ... according to the ... uh ... Declaration of Independence, that makes our Jerry as American as the Bunker Hill monument. I rest my case and on behalf of my wife's family I await any apologies that may be forthcoming, although God knows they probably don't deserve them.

- Ah, Knuckles, wait a bit, said the Bunser. Sure the mother of the Bunker Hill monument wasn't born in Ballinasloe, County Galway, like Jerry's was, and I know for a fact that Jerry himself was born and raised not far from that same town. Damned if you don't make him sound like a full-blooded Cherokee Indian instead of an Irishman lucky enough to have one American parent. I wish I could have said the same so I wouldn't have had to worry all those years I was here illegally. But I don't see any need at all for you to snarl at poor Eddie Burke like that.

- No offense meant, said Eddie Burke laughing, and none taken surely. As a matter of fact I interviewed Jerry at the time, very helpful he was too and proud of both his parents. I didn't know until today that he was kin to you. Please say hello from me when you speak to him again.

- But all that happened years ago, and this is the first time I've heard the explanation for what went on that night, said Jimmy in a strange quiet voice. I always thought of it as ... well, I don't know what. I do know that I was scared witless for six months afterwards, and Saints Patrick, Brigid, and Columba commanding flying squads of Connemara's most determined asses couldn't have dragged me back within five blocks of McCann's.

And I haven't seen or spoken to my poor cousin Joe that tended bar there since then. I heard he was nearly off his nut himself, worrying if he had borrowed money from me - from me, of all people! - and forgotten to pay it back, or in what other way he could have offended me ... God help the poor decent man, he won't believe any of this either when I tell him. Of course he heard all the details next time he came to work, but I guess the one thing he never found out was that his very own cousin was involved. Well, I guess our Joe is due for a big surprise.

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- Correct me if I'm wrong, Jimmy, said Kevin the fireman, but didn't you meet your wife-to-be while you were recuperating in the hospital? I met her once at a football dance out in Norwood, a Sligo girl, very pretty and sweet, altogether too good for the likes of you.

- I did indeed meet her that time in the hospital, Mr. Reilly, God bless your memory, replied Jimmy with a smile. I guess I was so scared and bedraggled that all the staff, especially the ones from Ireland, felt sorry for me. In those days all the Irish kind of looked out for one another, even if you were from the other side of the island, you lads know what it was like.

- God be with those days, said one of the Faheys. Not like today, no indeed ...

The nurses even concocted some story about malnutrition to persuade the higher-ups at the hospital to keep me an extra week and to get a bit of extra food for me at mealtimes, said Jimmy. Sheila and I used to talk a lot, and even when she was supposed to have had a day off, she'd come in to see me. I don't think she understood a word I said about waking up in Hell and being chased by demons and all that ... she told me later that she figured that the concussion I had and the medication they gave me had temporarily scrambled my brains.

Anyway, yes, we started to see each other pretty regularly, and after a year and a half we were married. I had quit drinking while I was in the hospital, and through one of the night nurses I got a job with a printer downtown, hard work but it paid well and helped get me my green card. We moved up here to Boston ten years ago to get a fresh start, and Sheila worked at St. Elizabeth's while I got through college. Before long I had a good job in the insurance business, and Sheila quit nursing to have our first child. Then there was another - they're nine and six now, two girls, redheads like their mother. There might be another enroute shortly, a boy please God, Jimmy finished to congratulatory noises from the group.

- But listen to yourself, man, interjected Eddie Burke slowly and triumphantly, as if he had been waiting a long time for Jimmy to say what he had just said. Follow what you're saying carefully. Your life has been transformed, we might even say transfigured. Agreed, and how? By leprechauns, that's how! Remember the old Bronx Jimmy: hard drinking, shiftless, headed nowhere. Then has mystical and physically damaging experience involving leprechauns ...

- Cardboard ones mistaken for evil spirits, but leprechauns nonetheless, said Knuckles reverently to himself. And then the new Jimmy. Begod, that's beautiful, like the story of Lazarus in the Gospels. His eyes were perceptibly moistened.

- Exactly, said Eddie Burke. And as a result of this strange encounter, subject decides to clean up his act. Meets wonderful girl, gives love, gets love, embarks on new upward path. Result again: the new Boston Jimmy, respectable, admired,

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devoted husband and father, full time successful ... ?

- Claims adjuster, prompted Jimmy.

- ... claims adjuster undoubtedly soon to be near the top of his profession, part-time bartender in one of Boston's classiest bars ... Jimmy, the inescapable conclusion is that not only should you not hate and fear leprechauns, you should really thank them every chance you get.

There was a small chorus of "hear hears" to approve Eddie Burke's logic. Jimmy stood silent with both hands on the bar; it seemed as if the process of digesting all that had preceded had overwhelmed his capacity for speech. Out of respect for his struggle, no one else spoke.

- Eddie Burke, Jimmy said at last, you've known me for years, first in New York and then here. You've also come into this pub regularly for years and never before now have you told me what you told me today. Will you explain to me why?

- Well, Jimmy, it's actually a little hard to explain, Eddie Burke said softly, but here's the gist of it: I didn't think it would have done you any good all these years to know the truth. In fact, I thought it would be hard on any man to find out that what so changed his life was not in fact a mystical experience of some kind, but instead a Marx Brothers episode that left the hero mildly concussed, a decent restaurant in shambles, and two dozen fellow human beings hysterical in one way or another.

And as a former member of the NYPD, I might also include in the list of those affected by your experience a station house where the desk sergeant was laughing so hard he couldn't answer the phone and three decent patrolmen who had to change into dry uniform pants after they finally got you to the emergency room. I knew the sergeant personally, and interviewed the three patrolmen during the first week you were in the hospital, and they told me these things themselves.

- God knows it didn't seem so amusing at the time, said Jimmy. You know I still have nightmares about it occasionally. But why ...

- Wait a moment, Jimmy, and let me finish before you ask your questions, said Eddie Burke. You'll have more before I'm through. But first I have to tell you about the aspect of this whole situation that I found genuinely strange.

- Oh god above, not more demons, murmured the Bunser in a worried tone. Sure I haven't gotten over the first lot yet.

- No, not more demons, Bunser - maybe more like angels, said Eddie Burke with a smile.

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Jimmy, you mentioned meeting your wife-to-be in the hospital, and I can tell you of many similar unusual but positive occurrences that took place shortly after your encounter. For example, the police officers who responded to the first call from McCann's, including the three patrolmen who rode with you in the ambulance, felt so bad about laughing at you that they sent you flowers in the hospital. You probably don't remember it, but I can assure you that NYPD cops don't do that for unemployed illegals every day.

Then the owners of McCann's, Corkmen and all as they were, decided not to press charges against you for all the damages, and in fact wanted me to tell you that if you needed a job when you recovered, they'd take care of you and help to get you a green card.

But strangest of all, the brunch patrons you so rudely interrupted - terrorized might be a more accurate word - not only decided not to sue you and everybody else they could find, but actually took up a collection for you - after the dust had settled a bit - to help pay your hospital bills. I didn't believe it myself until I looked in the detectives' report: the patrons were all New Yorkers, people reputed to push widows under hot-dog wagons and to feed orphans to the polar bears in the Bronx Zoo.

But somehow, under the influence of I'm not sure what, they eventually sent the hospital a check for thirty-two hundred dollars with instructions to give you the best of treatment and to contact them care of McCann's if more was needed. I know God works in strange ways, Jimmy, but your experience takes the cake. In all my long life I never saw so much good come out of anything so ridiculous.

- Well, I'm glad I brought such joy and laughter to so many that day, muttered Jimmy with some bitterness, but I guess there has to be a purpose to everything, even me making a complete fool of myself ... still and all I'm sorry I can't remember the looks on the faces of those people in the restaurant when I came screeching out of the cellar with that thing stuck to my backside. I guess I wasn't the only one converted that day ... and they took up a collection for me, dear god I don't believe it. And I never knew it to thank any of them, although they probably would have been happy enough never to see me again!

As Jimmy pondered the situation, the full impact of that morning's comedy and the totally unexpected reactions described by Eddie Burke began to impress themselves upon him, and gradually a big smile replaced the pained look that had been on Jimmy's face most of the afternoon. Then, almost before the patrons became conscious of this first change in his demeanor, Jimmy began to laugh heartily. A split-second later, there were laughter and talk the length of the bar; it was as if someone had suddenly turned up the volume on a television. The tension was broken at last, and everybody shared in Jimmy's relief.

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Naturally all the members of the little group who had sat in respectful but unaccustomed silence for most of the afternoon now had some comment to make about what they had heard. Rooskey and Peter Fahey, normally the most serious and taciturn of men, were repeating to one another in voices choked by laughter phrases from Eddie Burke's account, and in their mirth were slapping the bar so hard that there was danger of glasses being overturned. Both Knuckles and the Bunser had tears in their eyes from laughing ("not a pretty sight," commented Jimmy somewhat uncharitably later on).

- But now I have to ask you, Eddie Burke, said Jimmy quietly during the mayhem. Why did you finally tell what you told today? I mean, besides the fact that it's a great story altogether, do I sense a purpose of some sort, what they call in the movies an ulterior motive?

Eddie Burke took a short drink, then after a few seconds' reflection replied in a voice only Jimmy could hear.

- Well, to be honest, Jimmy my boy, I had heard from our friend Kevin the fireman here of your ... shall we refer to it as "leprechaun overkill"? last Paddy's Day, and I became concerned. He and Danny Finn and a few other friends of yours seemed to think that what you did to his leprechauns was ... well, weird is I guess as good a word as any. And you yourself would have to admit that the behavior ascribed to you could indeed have been seen as springing from a mind about to depart reality for parts unknown. Heaven knows I myself am not particularly fond of the leprechaun species or what they represent to most people, but I've never let them get the best of me as they were obviously getting the best of you. I wanted to ease your burden if I could.

Heaven knows life is hard enough on a husband and father without his having some silly thing like leprechauns to deal with. You know, Jimmy, all policemen - even retired ones - have bits of the psychologist in us, so it hadn't taken me long to connect your hatred of leprechauns to your traumatic if bogus experience in McCann's that day. I just wanted to clear a few things up for you ... even a Ballinamuck man deserves a break once in a while, Jimmy my jewel, concluded Eddie Burke in a louder voice. He was rewarded with laughter and scattered applause from the assemblage.

- I hope I live long enough to appreciate the full significance of that insight, Eddie Burke, Rooskey announced, but at this moment I would be far happier if our friend Jimmy here would transfigure the empty pint glass that stands before me into a full one, with or without the intervention of the supernatural.

- Coming right up, friend Rooskey, responded Jimmy heartily. Anyone else ready for a refill? This will be my round.

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- The miraculous transfiguration manifests itself once again, said Knuckles in an undertone to the Bunser. And may it seriously and permanently affect every bartender in the commonwealth.

The wet grey afternoon had melted into a damp chilly evening. The earlier heavy rain had eased off to an occasional shower, so the customers and musicians coming in around eight for the Monday night session were not soaked through as the earlier arrivals had been. As always around this particular hour on a Monday evening, the bar was filled with greetings, and laughter, and yelling of orders. In the babble the word "leprechaun" could be heard more frequently than might reasonably have been expected. Rory the night bartender had arrived a few minutes previously, and after tending to the business of the dangling banner, both he and Jimmy were soon busy filling glasses and trays at opposite ends of the bar. Most of the musicians, including of course Eddie Burke, were in the alcove off to the side unlimbering and tuning their instruments. After a few more minutes and the settling in of a few additional arrivals, a fine powerful session of music had taken shape.

During a pause between tunes, the door of the bar opened slowly, and a pair of young ladies hesitantly entered. Jimmy said that they seemed to exude a kind of low-level fear, as if suspecting that they might have entered an incorrect, unfriendly place in which their virtue might be threatened and from which a hasty departure might be required. The taller of the two was clutching with pale knuckles a copy of one of those "What to Do In ..." publications supplied by hotels to unwary travellers. Jimmy was working that side of the bar closest to the door and was keeping his eye on the girls because he wasn't sure what they wanted. He was afraid they might be Temperance Ladies or Jehovah Witnesses or something of the sort.

When the music started up again in the corner, both girls jumped like infant squirrels hearing car horns for the first time. Turning around to look in the direction of the sound, they seemed more hopelessly confused than ever, and acted for all the world as if they had been paralyzed or at least seriously disabled by the music.

Jimmy, who was still watching them from behind the bar, said later that he wouldn't have been at all surprised if they had fainted, or worse. He was interested professionally from an insurance adjustor's standpoint, he claimed, because he had never seen or heard of anyone dying from jigs and reels before.

After a pair of lively hornpipes, the musicians paused briefly for tuning and

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lubrication, and the momentary silence seemed to unfreeze the two women sufficiently for them to approach the bar. Jimmy smiled and greeted them, but receiving no response was starting to wonder if the deaf-mutes were now travelling in pairs. Finally the girl clutching the guide-book like a life-preserver leaned over towards Jimmy. He said he fully expected to be handed a little card asking for a contribution.

- *Excuse me, but is this an Irish bar?* she asked in a nasal little voice. Jimmy thought at first that she was kidding him, but something, probably the accent, told him she was serious. He wasn't sure how to handle it, so he played it straight. After all she might be one of Danny Finn's distant relatives.

- *It is, ma'am,* he replied. *One of the best in Boston.*

The two young ladies looked around with wide blue eyes, as if seeking some sign that would serve to confirm Jimmy's statement to them, but they obviously did not succeed. Their failure made them more flustered than ever.

- *But where ... but where are the leprechauns?* the shorter of the two asked.

- *Leprechauns, ma'am?* Jimmy repeated. He thought for a second that someone - why did Eddie Burke come to mind? - was playing a practical joke on him, but something was missing.

- *Yes, leprechauns,* replied the shorter one, obviously the spokesperson for the duo. *Back where we come from in Wisconsin there's an Irish bar, well it's really owned by a Polish family but the bartender is named Dennis, he has red hair and an accent like yours, and there are all these cute little leprechauns everywhere. They're really adorable. And on Saint Patrick's Day - we all call it 'Paddy's Day' - you have that here, don't you? - they have green beer and hats and green kielbasy and sauerkraut if you don't like corned beef and cabbage.*

- *Not everybody eats it because they say it gives you gas,* explained the other girl parenthetically.

Her friend nodded confirmation. - *The owners of the bar call themselves the O'Wisniewskis for the day, isn't that comical? and they rent a computerized leprechaun, it sings and tells jokes, everybody loves it. The whole town talks about it, and there's usually an article and picture in the local paper. Even the Lithuanians tell Kerryman jokes for weeks after. It's funny, though - Dennis the bartender always takes that particular week off. Gee, you'd think he'd want to be part of the celebration, wouldn't you? But I guess his poor old mother comes first ...*

- *But ... but you don't have any leprechauns,* concluded the tall one after her

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companion had at last run out of breath. Both girls lapsed into confused silence, obviously awaiting Jimmy's explanation for this strange and frightening phenomenon.

Meanwhile over in the musicians' corner Eddie Burke and Phil Mooney the banjo player had just started "Sixpenny Money", Jimmy's favorite jig. There were several empty seats remaining at the bar, but in spite of Jimmy's invitation to them to sit and enjoy to the music, the two girls remained standing, as if sitting down would have committed them to some uncomfortably alien course of action like relaxing and maybe having a good time. His offer of complimentary pints was likewise refused.

While Jimmy was at the tap loading a tray, the girls, looking more uncertain than ever, were conversing in low intense voices: the tall one seemed to tend towards the opinion that they really were in an Irish bar - albeit like none that either of them had ever seen or imagined - while her companion was fantasizing that they had stumbled into the Boston headquarters of some cult specializing in fiendish tortures to girls from Wisconsin. Jimmy was doing his best to maintain a helpful attitude, but Rory had gone to the gent's leaving Jimmy alone to face the thirsty crowds, and as a consequence his patience level was dropping rapidly.

The already precarious situation for the two girls was not improved when Kevin the fireman, who was sitting a few feet away but paying absolutely no attention to anything but the music, decided that the time had come for him to join in the session. As always, he followed his usual procedure, first taking his favorite spoons out of his socks (one spoon in each sock - if questioned, he would reply evasively that he kept the spoons there "for the warmth"). Only after he had poured a half-pint of Guinness over the spoons and wiped them dry with a red handkerchief never used for any other purpose was Kevin the fireman ready to begin clacking away merrily in time to the music.

Inspired by the sound of Kevin the fireman's spoons, Rooskey two stools over commenced without warning his own version of the ancient art of liltin', thereby producing a sound which the Bunser once said reminded him of a yodeling coyote trying to devour a live duck. By this time, said Jimmy, the Wisconsin Lassies were looking with open mouths at Kevin the fireman and Rooskey as if the two men were playing badminton with body parts.

- *To hell with them*, thought Jimmy as the yells demanding his attentions elsewhere in the bar increased, *here goes nothing*. He waited to make sure that Rory was back behind the bar, then beckoned to the girls.

- *Ladies, it's a little hard for me to tell you this, but since you're from Wisconsin I think you can deal with the truth. There are no leprechauns in this bar because...well, because I'm allergic to them.*

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- Allergic? the two girls squeaked in unison without the trace of a smile. *Oh god,* thought Jimmy, *this will be almost too easy.*

- Indeed, yes, said Jimmy with as much false mournfulness as he could muster. *Very sad, started when I was a baby in Ireland, no known medical reason for it. But thank heavens the medication keeps the projectile vomiting more or less under control. The boils, well, they say there's not much they can do about those until they get big and juicy, then ...*

At that moment raised voices and the occasional swear word from the end of the bar signalled the commencement - or, more accurately, resumption - of the nightly argument between Knuckles and the Bunser touching upon certain obscure but meaningful aspects of Irish history, on which topic each considered himself the bar's resident expert. Tonight Parnell and the Land League seemed to be the featured topic, but it was a little hard to know for sure; after all, the music in the corner was still going full tilt, augmented by Kevin the fireman's clacking spoons and Rooskey's spirited lilting.

In any event, the great Knuckles vs. Bunser debate would as always generate more heat than light and would eventually wind down to a mutual exchange of epithets, followed by the mutual purchase of pints by the combatants, and finally reach that evening's conclusion with Knuckles' never-successful attempt to sing "The Rocks of Bawn" without forgetting every other verse. The debate would be resumed the following night, more than likely with the protagonists changing sides. Nothing even vaguely resembling a "meeting of minds" was ever arrived at during these debates.

Jimmy's revelation about his allergy had been unnerving enough to them, but at the sound of Knuckles' and the Bunser's raised voices the two Wisconsin girls had turned deadly pale; their worst fears of being trapped in a thinly-disguised lunatic asylum seemed on the point of being realized. The more timid of the two actually hid her purse under her coat. Jimmy said that he had no way of knowing if they were Catholic, but if they had been, he was sure that there would have been a healthy amount of ejaculating going on at that moment. Their mouths seemed to be moving without making any sounds, he said, so he figured maybe that's just what they were doing.

But it wasn't until Warty came over and asked the two girls if they'd care for a drink that they really seemed to lose it, as Jimmy said later.

And certainly, as Phil the banjo player pointed out during a subsequent discussion of the evening's events, there was real irony in the fact that Warty, of all the regulars, most closely resembled a real living breathing leprechaun. Warty in the stoutest days of his youth could never have stood above four feet ten inches tall;

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he dressed regularly in green, and in fact no one had ever seen him in any other color; he wore strange curled shoes probably made by his West Kerry mother from mammoth skin some indeterminate number of years in the past.

Warty also wore a suspicious little hat with a raised crown, and had (Jimmy couldn't help but shudder when he noticed, Eddie Burke's earlier leprephobia analysis notwithstanding) almost unnaturally blue eyes, still bright in spite of his advanced age, which could have been anywhere from 65 to 765 years old. Warty was sociable enough but usually said very little to strangers, and Jimmy struggled to recall whether or not he had ever heard Warty make any reference to the cobbler's trade, or to hidden pots of gold.

In fact no one, not even the oldest of the regulars, knew Warty's real name, but it made no difference. At this moment, Warty was the very archetype of the gallant Irishman; from his sacred and inviolable stool in the corner he had sensed females in distress, and had hastened to offer his assistance as any Gaelic gentleman from the Red Branch Knights onward would have done.

It may have been that poor harmless Warty, the living leprechaun, smiling with very few remaining teeth and murmuring sweet nothings in an accent impossible for anybody not present at his christening to comprehend fully, appeared threatening in some way; it may have been that Wisconsin, blessed in other ways, could not boast of any similar octogenarian Kerry men, and thus could provide its sons and daughters no clue as to proper behavior in the presence of such; it may have been that Warty's defining aromas of alcohol and tobacco and yes, sheep, had at last overwhelmed them, had removed all doubt from their minds that they had made a grave error in entering the place and would make a possibly fatal one by staying: whatever the reason, the two girls looked first at Warty, then at one another, then back at Warty again, made what Jimmy described as little mid-Western squealing noises, and headed for the bar door literally at a trot. They both grabbed for the handle at the same time and hurled themselves out the door into the night, doubtless relieved to have come through the evening's experience alive and intact. They disappeared into a cab and were never to be seen again.

- Right in the middle of a neat set of polkas, too, the streels, said Mick Fahey indignantly as Jimmy told the story of their visit and hasty departure to some of the regulars later in the evening. Surely to heaven they could have waited a bit, shown the tiniest bit of respect. I can't imagine anyone being in such a hurry to get back to Wisconsin, wherever that is ...

- I believe it's out beyond Chicago, intoned the Bunser in his most informative voice. Terrible cold and snow all the time...a man told me once that you go out to fish and pull them already frozen from the water, even in July. Most of the inhabitants live in big round houses made of ice blocks, they drink melted seal fat like you or I would drink the smoothest poitín and never think twice of doing it.

LEPRECHAUNS

They take baths once every two years when the sun comes above the horizon. Wishconsin? Not for me, thank you.

- The attraction of those Polish leprechauns must have been too strong on those girls altogether, commented Knuckles. Or maybe they just couldn't wait to get back to that green kielbasy they seemed so fond of, he added with a heavy wink.

- Enough of that now, my bold Knuckles, said Peter Fahey severely. Bear in mind we're in the archdiocese here, no need to be using offensive language or insinuations even under these trying circumstances.

- Poor Warty, I think he believed it was his fault that they went running out like that, Jimmy said laughing. God help him, he asked me later in all seriousness if I thought he had come on a little too strong - maybe he ought to have asked them first if he could take their coats. then offered them a drink. It was all I could do to keep a straight face when I told him it probably wouldn't have made a hell of a lot of difference to people like that, from Wisconsin and all. He seemed to understand what I meant, but I still think he was a little hurt.

- By the way, said Rory from the other end of the bar, those women dropped their guidebook on the way out and never even came back for it. You know, Jimmy, that's too bad. I was hoping you'd get to show them some of those allergy boils you were so proud of.

- I was getting around to asking for an address so I could send pictures, Jimmy said. But they were out of here too fast.

- And maybe an autographed photo of Warty for good measure? said Eddie Burke.

- 'Twould serve them right, said Mick Fahey. Indeed it would.

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