

## Chapter 3 **DRINKING**

*“Till passion’s blaze cooled with his days  
And death demanded “Hither”  
But few deserve his graveside praise  
“He never hurt his mother”*

### **From the Poem “He Never Hurt His Mother”**

“Did you know”, Thomas half slurred, half shouted, “that there is only one animal in the whole world where the man has the weans, and not the woman?”

“Aye – I’m not sure what they’re called, but they’re from Chapelhall – kids from up there definitely came out of somebody’s backside, that’s for sure,” Ian piped in.

Everybody laughed, except Thomas. He wanted to, but he was being serious for the first time he could remember.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, I’m trying tae have an intellectual discussion here”

“Well, it’s your turn, so play or we’ll be here all night!”

“Is it me – so it is” said Thomas. “I’m chapping”

This was the regular Thursday night dominoes down at the bottom shop. At fourteen, John shouldn’t have been there, but Thomas had taken him down one week, with his mum standing at the front door of the house trying to stop him. She hated Thomas’ drinking, but loved her brother to death. She knew deep down he would look after her wee laddie.

And as for John – he loved it; and the bottom shop owners didn’t mind so long as he didn’t drink beer. After a few weeks, the players didn’t mind either. At least now the conversation sometimes strayed from football, work and women.

It was Thomas’ turn again, and he stared at the four dominoes he had left, then at the ones on the table, then back, scratching the back of his head as he did it. To an outsider he could easily be taken for the local maths genius, silently calculating the odds to optimise his next move. In reality he was half way to being drunk, never had a strategy for dominoes in his life, and had bad dandruff.

“It was the sea horse”

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“What was the sea horse – has one peed in your drink Thomas?”

“The animal where the man has the babies. I think its great. A hundred in one go.”

As he spoke, he laid down his double three, followed by his three-five, then his double five.

“That’s me out” he smirked with the confidence of someone who knows he had won because of nothing more than complete luck, but who always seemed to have just enough luck to convince the others he might be a dominoes genius, a late blooming prodigy; the best player ever to come out of Calderbank. Maybe even the whole of Airdrie.

Ian was looking puzzled, unconcerned with yet another defeat.

“But Thomas, how come this sea horse that has all the babies, isn’t the woman? I mean, when is a man a woman? Dis a sea horse man no have a.....you know whit a mean, a ...Sea Horse wullie? Dis the kids come oot it’s wullie? Jesus that must be as sore as hell. All I’m trying tae say is how do you know it’s a man?”

“Well, that’s a lot of questions yiv got there Ian. Fur a start, it’s no really a man, because it’s a horse”, said Thomas sitting back. He was warming up now.

“Bloody ha ha. So tell us how it works then, smart arse”.

“It’s dead easy” smiled Thomas, enjoying the attention. For the first time in his life, he felt smarter than the rest of the people in the bottom shop.

“I won’t get too technical noo, but basically the man and the woman sea horse do their stuff just as normal, but once the eggs get, you know, fertilised and that, the woman sea horse transfers them into a wee pouch on the man’s stomach, a bit like your beer belly, and they grow inside there. The poor man has huge contractions, and then he spouts out all these sea horses a few weeks later. At least a hundred, every time”.

“Jesus, I was shocked enough when Mary had our twins!” said Ian, with a look wedged midway between wonder and pain.

Andrew hadn’t said a word up till then, but brotherly jealousy was starting to boil over at all the attention Thomas was getting.

“How come you know all this about sea horses – have you been reading a book then?”

“No I huvny” spat Thomas, as if being caught book reading was something he didn’t want to be tarred with in public, and definitely not down at the bottom shop.

“It was on the TV tonight, when I collected wee John”

“So whit’s the big point anyway”

“It just made me think,” said Thomas, lowering his voice for the first time in weeks.

“Think about what?”

“Just think, that’s all”.

“See what you’ve done,” said Andrew with an ear-to-ear smile, turning around and looking at John, “You’ve gone and made Thomas think!”

John’s face turned a shade of pale pinkish-red that was only just barely enough to have his embarrassment spotted, and his first reaction was to smile - but say nothing. Without thinking, maybe emboldened by some pride in the part he was playing in the education of the bottom shop, he came out with a response that was unquestionably making its debut in that establishment.

“You should try some thinking yourself, it’s brilliant. Anyway, it’s not the sea horse you should be worried about, it’s the preying mantis”.

By this time the whole bar was listening into a heated discussion on Biology and the natural world, over a game of dominoes, down in the bottom shop in Calderbank. The world is a strange and glorious place indeed.

“Anything is possible now. It’s Airdrie for the European Cup next year” thought John.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, lets talk about the game at the weekend, this is doing my head in”, chipped in Andrew after a pause, with the look of someone whose head had indeed been well and truly done in.

“No, let the wee man speak,” said Ian. “Praying, what’s it called? Must be a Catholic anyway! So how come Andrew should be worried about them?”

Oh well – he had started this, so he had to finish it.

“First off, it’s not praying like in chapel. It’s preying, with an “e”. Preying as in eating. Eating other animals. The man preying mantis is a bit like you, Uncle Thomas. They love

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having sex. But they're a bit more careful. They only end up with one or two kids, not seven or eight".

John was warming to it now, as a few more people moved closer from the bar. "The man has to be really careful, because if the woman goes off him, half way through, or just starts to feel a wee headache, she starts to eat the man's head, while he's getting on with the business".

"Jesus Christ, the boy's only fourteen and he's in a pub talking about having your head chewed off while you're.... Oh for Christ's sake, I'm trying to drink over here!"

"Anyway, the thing is, as the woman mantis is eating her man's head, he just keeps on going! It seems like sex comes before everything, whether you are a preying mantis or just a bloke from Calderbank"

"I don't get it – how can this Mantis thing keep thinking to carry on, if its brains are being munched away by the wife?"

"Well, that's the really amazing thing. The scientists have just found out that the male mantis has some of its brains at the wrong end! Just enough to keep it thinking - "Must keep going, come on, just keep it up, keep it up. I reckon humans, or at least men, must be closer to the mantis than we are to any other animal on the planet!"

This was his first time holding court at the bottom shop, and he was absolutely loving it.

"So uncle Andrew, that's why I thought of you. Auntie Maureen has chewed my head off a few times when she's been round visiting, so I think you should be really careful tonight when you get back home. Remember you've been drinking, so be careful when she starts to nibble your ear. She might be after more than you think"

The victory was his. The whole pub cracked up, and even Andrew joined in. It was the most accurate description of his good lady wife he had ever heard, and he was already thinking "one of these days I'm going to tell Maureen about the Mantis".

Thomas slapped John on the back.

"Nice wan wee man. Here – huv a drink. I won't tell yer Mammy", as he poured some beer into John's glass.

And so John was introduced to drinking in the bottom shop, along with the men. He had had plenty of beer and wine before that of course, but this was different. This was

illegal, and he was down there with people three times his age, not slinking behind the shed at school, or hiding over in the woods. And it was different in another way too. His glass was still half full with Coke when Thomas had poured in his Guinness. It tasted foul, but he didn't say a thing. In fact it was less the taste, more the look of the mixture that put him off. It seemed like some illicit Chemistry experiment gone badly wrong, with the thick, gungy Guinness fighting against the fizzy, exuberant coke, with neither coming out on top.

"A bit like Uncle Andrew's marriage" John thought for a second. "The gunge seemed to be winning, but the mixture was still fizzing a bit, and the overall result wasn't looking very appetizing."

John sat watching the next game of dominoes, and decided it was time to head back home. There was a great atmosphere around the table now.

"It's amazing how a wee bit of Biology can get the fun started" he thought, as he told Thomas it was time for him to go. Some of the farewells made him feel good as he walked out.

"Come back the next time"

"Yir good company wee man"

"Watch out fur any all them Mantis things crossing the road noo".

John's last thought as he walked out the wide front door of the Bottom Shop, was about his dad. He never went to the pub. Never. At least John had never seen him go, or even seen him take a drink. That was probably a good thing for his health, for his mum, for most things. But John couldn't help thinking he was missing out on something; the silly, stupid, meaningless, idiotic, mad stuff that went on in a place like the bottom shop. His dad always said.

"Remember the three most important things. Read. Think. Learn".

John didn't ever have a problem with that, but wished he had made it four.

Read. Think. Learn. Have a silly, stupid, meaningless, idiotic, mad laugh as often as possible.

John only had to walk across the street to his Granny's house, but he was feeling too good for a sudden return to

normal life. With a quick check that his Granny wasn't sitting at her front window, he made a fast right turn, ran round to the front of the pub and headed off out of the village, over towards the football park. After twenty or thirty yards, just past the last of the village street lights, he turned around, knowing he was well out of sight of his granny, and stared back at the bottom shop. It was getting dark, but its big picture windows glared out, pulsing with energy. Sitting on the hill, it looked more like a guard post for Fort Calderbank, or some new design for a lighthouse, warning the approaching vehicles of the looming danger on the main street. Although the light from the pub-lighthouse was almost blinding, there was no sound coming from inside. He could only just make out all the usual suspects, silently shouting, laughing, arguing, and of course singing. It was almost ten o'clock, it was Scotland, people were drunk and so they sang. Watching this from outside, John laughed out loud. It might be real life he was watching, but it looked to him like a Buster Keaton movie at a giant outdoor cinema, or maybe a karaoke night for the Airdrie Mime Artists Society, as the good people of Calderbank forgot all of their troubles and silently let their hair down for the passing world to see.

He was still laughing as he turned around and headed out of the village. Within fifty yards the bright lights of the bottom shop had disappeared, along with the streetlights around the bus stop. Apart from the faint moonlight behind the clouds, and the glare from the Edinburgh road half a mile up ahead, he had suddenly left civilisation and entered into that cold, dark limbo between Calderbank and the outside world. John started wondering if this had been one of his better ideas, and quickened his steps. As he rounded the corner before the football park, the branch of a tree overhanging the pavement in front of him suddenly shook, as if it had come alive and the branch was out to grab him. He could have yelled. He could have screamed. He could have run like crazy. But he didn't. He froze to the spot, waiting for the giant Mantis to lower itself down from the branch and start eating his head.

"Oh ya bastard" spluttered the mantis.

Strangely, it took John a full ten seconds to process this input and come to the fairly obvious conclusion - this was likely to be a human and not a giant insect. He peered into a

gap in the fence, and could only just make out someone's face down on the ground. Forgetting all the good advice his mum had given him for fourteen years, he squeezed into the gap, and helped the old guy to his feet. John was soon regretting his good deed for the day, given his new friend was smelling like a clogged up outside toilet full of winos. He was caked in mud from head to toes.

"Are ye O.K. mister?"

"Ah shink sho shun. Am a in Chapelhall yit?"

"Naw, no yet. Yiv got a wee bit to go".

John couldn't help but smile, as he staggered up the road a few hundred yards, and steered the old guy towards the path to Chapelhall.

"Just keep going along here and you'll be in Chapelhall".

"God blesh ye ma wee pal". A Catholic too. His mum would feel better about it now.

As he watched the old guy stagger off into the night, he knew he would be OK. Someone at the other end would steer him in the right direction to wherever he lived, and whoever was waiting up for him to get back. People might drink too much, swear too much, fight too much and gamble too much. But their hearts were all in the right place.

"You didn't drink anything did you?" his mum asked, as he arrived back that night.

"Of course not. Just a coke".

"I bet Thomas didn't have just a coke though?"

"No not really mum, but he was fine."

"And I hope you didn't hear any swearing. What did you all talk about down there?"

"Oh just about science mum. Biology mainly. You should go down there sometime. The bottom shop is just like school really, but with much better teachers."

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*It was a beautiful, golden, late Autumn evening, and with the kids all out playing in the streets and Maggie up at the Chapel, that left just Johnnie and his mother-in-law at home. Even Johnnie called her "maw" as everyone else seemed to, whether she was their mother or not. It was one of those strange things about Scotland at the time. Even though the*

size of the average Catholic family meant doubling up on all of the beds and having a rota system for who slept on the floor, that was rarely enough. For most families, even the Catholic ones, everyone known to you within a two-mile radius became part of your family by default. You ended up with a couple of busloads of “aunties” and “uncles” and “cousins”. It felt good. But as far as Johnnie could figure out there was only one “maw”, and that said a lot for her.

Johnnie was just settling down with his pipe. They weren't talking, but that was OK. They were both quite happy to wile away an hour or two in their own wee worlds. As she did every night, maw sat by the window, watching the world go by. People wandering past would give her a wave, and she would always smile back. Some who didn't know her assumed she was just a nosy old lady, peering into other people's lives to give her own a bit more meaning. The rest knew her for what she was. A kind, warm, bright, sharp, and now finally an old lady, who since her accident couldn't get out of the house as she would have dearly loved to. So that window to her was her eyes, and ears, and most of all her legs, letting her live some of the life she was missing; meeting her friends and neighbours, keeping up with the news, going to church, helping people out, all from behind that curtain on the second floor of 11 Fir View. It was her way of staying sane, and feeling normal, feeling she was still a part of the community.

Friday nights were her favourite times, with all of life passing by between five and seven. There were the men coming back from work, looking forward to the weekend. Women coming home with the shopping. Kids rushing out to play, knowing there were two and a half days before they had to go back to school. On nice nights like this one, men would gather on the street corner outside the house, for no great reason other than to pass the time away having a pleasant wee natter, with anyone who wanted to do the same. And of course there was the bottom shop, opening up for its busiest night of the week. She had the best view of the bottom shop in Calderbank, with the front door in direct line of sight.

So for half an hour she sat chatting away to herself in her mind, updating her thoughts on who was doing what, and who was with whom, as the latest episode of the village unfolded before her. Every passer-by, everyone on the street corner,

had a story. And she knew them all, even though she hadn't spoken to most of them for years.

"Och, there's wee Margaret Traynor. She must be going up to the post office. I can see she has some letters. She's a nice wee lassie. It was sad when her granny passed away. She wis a good pal of mine. I remember playing with her when she was a wee girl, and I remember when Margaret's mammy was born. That was a right panic. Och, wee Margaret turned out to be such a nice girl too. Her granny wid have bin proud of her. It's a shame she never knew her granny."

"That's an awful big crowd of boys on the corner. I hope there's not going to be a fight. It's an awful long time since there's been a fight out there, and I canny ever remember wan this early in the night. Oh dear – there's another big crowd coming down Fir View. That's Mary McDonald's wee boy in front of them. It looks like he's got a big brick or something. Och, it's OK. It's a football. They must just be going over the park for a game."

"Och, there's that James Green. Oh my, he's waving up at me. I'll jist pretend I didnae see him. What was it Thomas said they called him now? Was it "Putter"? Naw, it was more like "Garter" or "Gasser" or something. Och, I can never remember these nicknames. But wan thing I can remember is, he's done some bad things. His mammy must be at her wits end by noo. But he's wearing overalls, so he must be working again. That's good. Maybe he's changed. And he's headin down towards his mammy's house. That's nice. They'll be having a nice wee dinner together."

"There's Mrs Travis, and she's got her shopping bag with her. She always looks up. There we are, I'll gie her a wee wave. She'd do anything for you. It's a pity about her man. Why is it the nicer the girl is, the worse her man seems to be? Except for our Maggie of course. I'm glad Johnnie didn't hear that wan."

"That must be the day shift men back from the pits now. It's hard to tell who they are from up here. Except wee "Jock" Toner. I could tell Jock from the other end of the street, the way he walks wi his chest all puffed out. I'll see some o' them later I bet, going tae the bottom shop."

"I wis wondering how long it wid be, before I saw wan of my boys. Andrew. He'll be up tae see me later, but not before he's

*had a few. He must look forward tae his Fridays more than anything. At least he can have some time off from that wife of his. Och, that's no nice. But it's true. And there's Thomas wandering over. Och that's good. There we go – a wee wave and a big smile fae Thomas. That Andrew, he's only waved because Thomas did. At least the two brothers can still go oot fur a drink together. There's a lot ye canny say that about."*

*"And here comes wee Jocky McNeil with someone. Now who could that be? I've never seen him before. I wonder if it's maybe a brother I haven't seen before, or somebody from his work. I wonder...."*

*She needed some help on this one. There was nothing worse than having a piece of the jigsaw puzzle that was Calderbank that you couldn't fit.*

*"Johnnie, who is this wi' Jocky McNeil?"*

*He was jolted from his own world by the fire. Johnnie's first reaction was to pretend not to have heard, but a quick glance saw she was waiting expectantly for him. Johnnie ambled over to the window, just in time to see Jocky and the mystery man disappear into the bottom shop.*

*"That looks like Paddy McQueen. The McQueens just moved into the top end of Fir View last week. I bumped into Paddy and his family at the Chapel. He seems like a nice man, and a Catholic as well. Jocky must be showing him the main sights of Calderbank"*

*Johnnie started to turn away, thinking his contribution was over. He had his own problems to solve by the fire.*

*"Sit up here for a wee bit Johnnie".*

*"Aye, OK". He knew not to argue.*

*At first they both stared out of the window in silence. A few minutes passed before Johnnie commented "There's a lot of people heading into the pub now maw".*

*"Aye there is. Thomas and Andrew went in earlier. Do you never want to go down and join them Johnnie?"*

*Johnnie had never been a drinker. He never saw the point in getting drunk, staggering around the streets and being sick. He'd prefer to stick to his pipe. But it was more than just getting drunk that he didn't like the thought of. He never had much time for most of the men who went to pubs a lot. The people he liked at work were more like him.*

*“Och, no really maw. I’ve better things to spend my time on, and better ways to spend what money I earn.”*

*“Aye, you’re a good man. I think you might just like some of the company, and some of the chatting. And having a laugh. It’s not all bad people that go to the bottom shop.”*

*“Aye, maybe I would have liked it some of the time. But it’s too late to start that now. Maggie and me have a family to bring up.”*

*She bent over to the side of her chair, and Johnnie could hear a clinking sound as she sat back up straight.*

*“Would ye have a wee stout wi’ me then Johnnie. Jist wan mind ye”.*

*“Aye. There’s no harm in just having wan stout.”*

*He opened the two bottles of Mackeson, and they both sat in silence again for a few minutes, watching the world go by, and sipping on their stout.*

*“You know Johnnie, you should wander down the bottom shop wan night. It wid shock a few people in there all right! And I think you might get a surprise. Thomas said to me wan night that there was only two places you can see the whole world from. The bar at the bottom shop, and my window.”*

*“Aye Maw, Thomas was always the philosopher.”*

*“Now I won’t hear a word against him. He is the kindest and funniest man ye could meet. I think you’d be surprised. I bet if you went down there for just wan night, you would hear and see enough for a hundred o’ thae poems o’ yours.”*

*“Och, I wasn’t making fun of Thomas. I suppose the real reason I don’t go, is because I know I wid maybe like it too much. And I bet you’d be right about the poems. You always find the cleverest and the funniest people where you least expect to. Like down the pit, or on the street corners, and probably down the bottom shop as well.”*

*“Aye Johnnie, when I was a wee girl, we were told it wouldn’t be oor place to try tae better ourselves. Our job was to find a man and bring up his weans, when he was out working. Oh and remember tae have the dinner on for him coming back in”.*

*Johnnie had a wee laugh. He was enjoying talking to maw, a lot more than he ever imagined. She was a wise old lady, who had been through a lot, and with a whole lifetime of wisdom locked in her mind. She grew up when Queen Victoria*

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*was on the throne, had been through two world wars already, and she was still going strong. And there she was stuck in front of her window, winding down her last years, not able to leave her house.*

*“It’s a mad world, with some of the stupid arses we have running things, and somebody like maw, stuck up here at her window”, he thought to himself.*

*“Oh Johnnie. There’s that James Green again. I saw him earlier. What was it you all call him again?”*

*“I think it’s “Gutter”, maw.”*

*“Aye, that was it. Gutter. He’s been a wild, wild laddie that wan, always getting intae fights at work and when the pubs come out. But you know wan thing I’m sure of. He’s a good wee laddie at heart. He’s always helping his mother. I don’t think he’d dae anything wrong without a good reason. Naw, he never hurt a soul”*

*They watched Gutter head into the bottom shop for a good night’s drinking. Darkness was just starting to show its face, and they heard the sound of the kids coming back upstairs. Maw just peered more intently from her window, taking in the last few people she could see walking past, screwing up her eyes and adjusting her glasses. Johnnie wandered back to his chair, and felt for his notepad and pencil. He opened a blank page and scribbled down a few words before the silence was shattered.*

*Idea. Poem. “Never Hurt a Soul”. Drunk/fighter. Kind to family.*

*Idea. Poem? Painting? Maw. Life. Window. Wise words.*

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*It was one of those perfect Friday nights in Calderbank. It was freezing outside, but inside the house the coal fire seemed to know, and the flames crackled higher than normal, drawing everyone around it. It was the kind of fire that seemed to burn off all of the wee niggles that all families face and bind them together, if only on the surface, and maybe just for one night.*

*Maggie sat on the left, casting on to start knitting her latest woollen masterpiece. The kids covered most of the floor, sprawling around reading comics.*

*“I bagsy the Bunty next”.*

*“Only if I can get your Dandy”*

*“But I was next for the Dandy”*

*“Och, let her have it. You can go first for the Dandy for the next two weeks”.*

*“OK, OK. I’m getting a bit fed up reading anyway”.*

*That was about as intense as things could get on a night like that; being snug inside 3 Calder Street was enough to make it the best place in the world to be. Johnnie sat on the right of the fireplace, his accordion on his knee, and the pipe smouldering on an ashtray in front of him. He was almost bent double, with his left ear as close as he could get it to the front of the instrument, the way he always did when he was practicing something new.*

*“You’ll do yourself an injury,” Maggie whispered to him, without taking her eyes off the knitting needles.*

*“Don’t be daft. I want to keep the noise down”, knowing it made no difference to the sound he was making. Bending down that way was more like his signal, his way of saying to all within earshot, “Just practicing. Ignore all mistakes until I straighten up”.*

*A few minutes later he sat back in the chair and started playing, and a big smile came over Maggie. She loved “Boolavogue”. It might be a bit of an Irish rebel song, but it sounded as nice as any hymn to her. She started humming it, throwing in a few words along the way.*

*“Mm mmm mm mmm, as the sun mm mm mmm”.*

*Just as the scene was in danger of crossing that precariously thin line between idyllic and sickly sweet, the front door crashed open, and what sounded like a big bag of potatoes crumpled on the floor.*

*“Holy Mary mother of God”, Maggie shrieked, dropping a stitch.*

*“Naw, it’s no her at all, it’s me Maggie. It’s Thomas. Gie us a hand up”.*

*It had been a few weeks since Thomas had last dropped in, and since it was a Friday night, and past pub closing time, dropping in was something he did quite literally.*

*Maggie welcomed him with the usual smile-sowl she always kept for her favourite brother. Johnnie enjoyed the occasional chat with him, but not when he was too drunk, and definitely not when there was something else he wanted to be*

doing. As for the kids, they loved him. He was always good to them, and was the funniest person they had ever known; especially when he was drunk.

“Would you want a wee drink Thomas” Maggie whispered directly into his ear, as she helped him to her chair by the fire.

“Aw, don’t worry Maggie. I’ve had a few already”.

“OK, I’ll make you a cup of tea then”, this time Maggie making sure the children could hear.

“Aw wait a minute there hen, if you’re insisting, a’ll have a wee whisky. A night-cap wid be nice, seein it’s sae cauld outside.”

Thomas laughed his huge reverberating belly laugh, one that no human being had ever been known to resist joining in with.

“So, you’re out of the pub early tonight then Thomas” Johnnie asked, putting down the accordion. He didn’t mind Thomas normally, but he would have preferred a nice wee family night that night.

“Aye. There was some news I wanted to tell Maggie. And there’s another reason tae. There was a new man joined the work this week, so I wis showing him around the Calderbank night life.”

The laugh erupted again, as Maggie came in from the kitchen holding a large glass of whisky, that she quickly handed to Thomas.

“And to be honest, he was boring the arse aff me!”

“Thomas! I told ye no tae swear if the kids are here.”

“Aw sorry sister, I keep fuckin forgetting! Aw Jesus! I bloody forgot again!”

“So what did he think of the night life then Thomas”?

“No a lot, Johnnie. We started in the top shop, had a couple of pints in the middle shop, and ended up in the bottom shop. That’s the first time for years I’ve done a full pub-crawl, and it made me realise something. For aw the great people here, Calderbank is really jist three pubs along a main street wi loads a cooncil hooses wedged in between, and a couple o bus stops tae git ye oot, if ye need tae make a runner. If it wisnae fur good people like Maggie, and her supply of drink, it could all get a wee bit depressing!”

*For the third time the belly laugh thundered from the chair.*

*“So, Thomas, what was it you had to tell me. Not bad news I hope”.*

*“Aye Maggie, I wid huv forgot if ye hadnae reminded me. Big Bill McGee.”*

*There was silence around the room with everyone staring at Thomas, waiting for the remains of the sentence to eke its way out into the public domain. That had to wait for a sip of whisky to go down.*

*“Bill McGee is dead. Died this afternoon. He was found lying on the A8, in a terrible mess”.*

*“Thomas. Remember the kids are here!”*

*“Aw bloody hell Maggie, I’m no goin tae corrupt them, I’m jist tellin what happened, that’s aw. Anyway, some are sayin he tried tae run across the road after a few pints, but I don’t think that’s whit happened.”*

*Silence again, as twelve eyes stared back in expectation.*

*“Well?” Maggie asked.*

*“Well whit?”*

*“Well, what dae you think did happen to Bill?”*

*“Aw, that! Well, the consensus in the middle shop agreed wi the bottom shop, but the tap shop wis split down the middle. Ye see Bill wis over in Holytown, so unless he wis totally legless and had lost his way, he widnae huv bin crossing the A8. He wid hav walked over the bridge. So I think Bill fell aff the bridge on to the road, and was hit by a car or a lorry and left there. That wid explain the mess he wis in.”*

*Even Johnnie was getting intrigued now.*

*“But Thomas, are you sayin he committed suicide, or he just keeled over because he was drunk? There’s an awfy big fence on the bridge. It doesn’t seem very likely that he would just fall off”.*

*“Good detective work there Johnnie! I agree wi ye. I think – or I should say the bottom shop thinks – it wis wan of three things. Either he wis pushed, or he committed suicide like ye said”.*

*“That’s only two things,” John offered, bringing the kids into the discussion for the first time.*

*“Aye, yir right wee man. Big Bill McGee wis either murdered, or he committed suicide, or the wan I missed out the last time.*

*I wis jist testing ye'se were aw listening. I wis talking tae Ralph McDonald. You know, the polis man fae round near me. I bumped into him on my way tae the pub. He said there was wan very suspicious thing. When they found big Bill, they noticed right away that he smelled terrible. And his zip wis doon. So that has tae be it. Big Bill was standin up there on the fence on top of the bridge, trying tae pee, and he lost his balance. It must huv been a terrible sight fur the driver o' the car that hit him, seeing Big Bill coming straight fur him haudin his thing there, and spraying aw over the windscreen! It must've seemed like some poor man had fallen oot o an aeroplane, or maybe some new kamikaze breakaway wing fae wan o the Glasgow gangs"*

*This time they all added to the wall-shaking laugh that came from somewhere deep inside Thomas' stomach, or maybe he had some unknown organ even deeper inside the body. Maggie tried to keep her face straight.*

*"We shouldn't be laughing now. Bill died today. I know his mother. She'll be devastated."*

*"Och, yir right Maggie. It wis jist the thought. And we're no laughing at Big Bill, and definitely no his mammy either. Anyway, you know whit a think. Laughing is the best medicine fur everything. I wish people wid laugh more. Big Bill wis aw right. A bit of a fighter. And he wisnae like me when he wis drunk. I jist get dafter and laugh more. Bill got depressed and fought more. But he wis a good man really. He wid always take the time tae help ye. And wan thing I know. He loved his mother. Even if he wis blind stupid drunk, he never hurt his mother"*

*Johnnie reached into the corner beside his chair, and picked up a pencil, and a small notepad. Flicking through some pages, he stopped at some notes he had scribbled down a long time before. He put a soft line through the words "Never hurt a soul", just in case he changed his mind. Underneath he wrote.*

*"Poem. Story of Bill McGee. He Never Hurt his Mother".*

*Without anyone even noticing, he slipped the notepad back in the corner, and sat back in his chair.*

*Thomas sat down on Maggie's chair with his glass of whisky.*

*"Whit's the comic yir reading there John?"*

John looked at the comic and put it on top of the pile. "Oh it's nothin. I was just holding it"

Thomas looked over. "The Bunty! Maggie, get over here, we have a big family problem. Yir wee laddie is reading the Bunty! We can't let this get out! We'll never be able to go tae Communion again!"

"Aw wheesht Thomas. Keep yir voice down or they'll even be finding out in Chapelhall!"

"But Maggie, we huv tae put a stop tae it! He'll be collecting scraps next! He'll be trying tae swap his three angels for something he hisnae got. Then whit'll we dae?"

Thomas is the only person who could ever get away with talking like that, and John joined in with Thomas' laughter, knowing full well he was only kiddin'. Thomas not only seemed to laugh longer and louder the more drunk he was, he also seemed to become more sensible, and articulate, the more he slobbered his words.

"Johnnie, huv you really read aw them books, or do ye jist keep them up there fur show." Thomas had leapt to his feet before Johnnie could even get an answer in, grabbing the thickest tome he could see.

"A mean tae say Johnnie, look at this wan. It's no even written by an author. No even a human being. It's written by a saint for Gods sake! And wan wi the same name as me!"

Thomas walked over to the fire, suspended his glasses on the end of his nose, left hand on his hip, holding the book in his right.

"Now, children, today we are going tae study this book, written by a saint. Saint Thomas Aquinas, a good pal of mine. The book is his thickest wan, and it's called SU...SUMM... Hold on... SUMMA THE..OLOG..ICA. SUMMA THEOLOGICA. And it wis written ages ago. In the name o God, he died in 1274! Johnnie, this book is probably worth a fortune. It's still in really good nick as well!

The laugh bounced off the walls again, as Thomas carefully put the book back, thinking maybe it really was worth a lot of money.

"Aye, there's a lot up there in that hied of yours Johnnie. More than the rest of us aw added up!"

Thomas kept the room entertained for the next half-hour, and only started to fade as the clock struck eleven. Johnnie

sat puffing his pipe, Maggie started to put away her knitting, and the kids were beginning to rub their eyes.

“Och, I’d better be headin back round the road Maggie. I’m glad I popped in though.”

“It’s always nice tae see you Thomas. You know that”.

It was only then that Thomas seemed to notice that Johnnie’s accordion had been sitting beside him all of this time.

“Johnnie, gie’s wan wee tune before I go”, pointing at the accordion.

“Now c’mon Thomas, it’s way past the weans’ bedtime”

Thomas smiled his mile wide smile, and gave Maggie a big hug. “Aw, jist wan wee song. You can choose it”

As usual Maggie caved in. “Jist one, then it’s off back home for you”.

“So, Maggie, what’s it to be?” asked Johnnie as he strapped on the accordion, only too happy to get back to his practice.

“Boolavogue. See if you can play Boolavogue.”

“I love that song Maggie. A great choice fae ma big sister”.

Johnnie enjoyed the challenge of playing something he had only just tried for the first time earlier that night. He was soon into it, and it sounded good, adding a gentle lilting swagger, not there on the record they had. Maggie sat in her chair, eyes closed, picking up from where she left off.

“Mm mmm mm mmm, as the sun mm mm mmm”.

Thomas was ready for a big exit though, and Maggie’s humming was drowned out, by a voice that could be heard down at the bottom shop, and probably beyond.

“At Boolavogue, as the sun was setting  
O’er the bright May meadows of Shelmalier,”

The words “Boolavogue” and “Shelmalier” were sung at twice the volume of the rest, which themselves were a few decibels beyond shouting. His right fist pounded out the beat like a German beer drinker who had forgotten his litre mug, or was too drunk to know if he was still holding it. Johnnie was looking at the words as he played, and for the first time any of them could remember he joined in, his voice a mere lullaby compared to Thomas’. As he quietly sung

“Then Father Murphy, from old Kilcormack,  
Spurred up the rocks with a warning cry.”

Thomas was off on his own variation, making it up on the spot. Drunk he definitely was, not educated beyond fifteen,

*and not very much before that, but even Johnnie saw him as the sharp, intelligent, funny and creative man he truly was.*

*“Then wee Father Murphy, who came fae Kilmarnock  
Wis hit wi’ a rock, and began tae cry.”*

*He sailed seamlessly back in time with Johnnie for the last two lines, raising his voice a few more notches, with Maggie’s gentle hum now completely overpowered in the background.*

*“Arm! Arm!” he cried, “for I’ve come to lead you,  
For Ireland’s freedom we fight or die.”*

*By this time Maggie was looking out from behind the curtains, checking there were no neighbours making their way over, or even worse, any drunken Protestants hearing Thomas blast out that last line.*

*“Aw, that was great. Maggie, you might be seein a lot more of me. Down the bottom shop, then up tae Maggie’s fur a wee nightcap and a singsong. The perfect way tae spend a Friday night.”*

*As he swayed off in the general direction of home, they could just about hear him starting up again, this time entertaining himself in a voice oscillating precariously between a low whisper and a slurred drawl, trying hard to find it’s centre of gravity.*

*Johnnie watched, as he saw the uncontrolled stagger of a happy drunk gradually morph into a flowing, gently swaying movement, fused with the same lilt and rhythm as the song Thomas was singing.*

*“At Boolavogue, as the sun was setting.....”*

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