

## Mountain Men

*Burn the bastards*, Tommy Giblin used to bark at anyone unlucky enough to cross his path, as he slinked through his territory like a town fox. Every day he'd pop into Coral's for his daily bet then to Joe's Corner for a bacon cob. And then he'd spit and curse his way down to The Rose and Crown for a solitary pint.

He slowed as the years caught up with him. He died without fuss or visitor in his smelly low-tier OAP home. Even his death sigh was *burn the bastards*.

Matt Evans sat in the next-to-empty church at Tommy's funeral, mulling over his case-load. Matt's job was starting to bite bits off of him. Maybe he was too sensitive. 'Our *selfish* society, the *false*-economy of it all,' he'd often mutter.

Only last week they'd had to force their way in to a house where a body had been decomposing for six weeks. An eighty-six year-old Indian man, abandoned. It was the stink that finally alerted the postman's attention.

The coroner's report indicated that he was lying helpless in his own piss and shit for days before he died. "He must have been yelling till his voice gave out," the dead man's Doctor whispered to Matt. "Our failure I'm afraid..." Matt heard those yells, now and again, as he went about his work. "Lessons must be learnt from this case," that was always banded about after dissecting the facts, but Matt knew these words were hollow, nothing ever changed: if it cost – kick it into the long grass. The horrors of the job sometimes played on his mind. Maybe that was down to the K he sniffed most weekends, though. "*Purely recreational*," he often kidded to himself.

He was prone to a whinge or two, as well: "Cases like Tommy are a pain in the balls," he'd said to his line manager over a pint the other night. "You're playing

Laurie Cusack

a blinder, Matt.” But Matt knew he was just saying that. Nobody wanted to hear his gripes. No one wanted to take his role on, either.

Tommy had been a character.

Maybe it was the culmination of recent cases. Or was he glimpsing what might be awaiting him in the decades to come?

Matt had put out a circular:

*Appealing to relatives or friends of the late Tommy Giblin who hailed from Old Ross, County Kerry, Ireland, who left Ireland in 1951 and settled in Leicester, please contact...*

Matt dispensed his duties with dignity. He knew his actions helped tie the final knots. There was a *bit* of satisfaction in that. He was part of the Social Action Pod that oversaw cases like Tommy’s. He’d been doing it for two years now. His colleagues up at County Hall always pulled his leg: “Better ask Matt, our Corpse Supremo...”

He’d expected zilch from his press-circular. But last night, out of the blue, a Kathy Grimes phoned from Birmingham. She was a few pews behind him, now. He was eager to have a natter with her. Catholic ritual had started boring him and as he looked around, he nodded at her.

*“Such fine threads that hold us all...”*

Matt was one of half a dozen mourners. Most were frontline service providers showing they care. Perks of the job, hey! He scoffed. Irish funerals were notoriously big. Not this one, not for this loner, poor sod. Matt wondered which cosmic address Tommy Giblin was bound for, as Fr Dolan droned on:

*“...the protean nature of human existence; the bond of family; our eccentricities; our peculiarities; our human foibles; our weaknesses, truly link us all...”*

There were two obese workers from Merry Thistle Care Home in front who were itching to spark up. The smell of fag was all over them. Duty-sent. They were full of fidget – no doubt sore-buttocked on their hard-wood pew. Penance. Unused to Catholic rites. They kept giving each other the how much frigging longer look.

Matt started thinking about Tommy’s catch phrase again. Possibly the sort of thing the SS would have snarled to the sonderkommandos at Auschwitz: “Hurry up and burn the bastards!”

*“...Irish in work camps in 1950s England...”* a life summed up in a couple minutes, *“...sure the Irish would have flocked to big jobs like the building of the M1 and similar infrastructure projects in post war England. Men like Tommy Giblin worked for many a year on such projects. A lonely existence you might say, but maybe there was a beauty in it as well...”*

Matt visited Tommy when Fr Dolan was there and they’d exchanged looks when Tommy kept shouting, “Burn the woolly bastards!” He was getting his whiskers trimmed in bed a couple of months back. “Posts are for pissing on, Father.”

He thought Tommy was talking gibberish. The Irishman looked very frail by then, and the barber sheared him without resistance. But Tommy’s words clicked when Matt passed by the Rose and Crown a couple of days ago. He spotted a bollard on the corner of Clyde Street that was dressed in a woolly outfit. It made Matt smile. That woolly-bollard must have lodged in Tommy’s mind: guerrilla-knitting. The multi coloured wool against the surrounding brick and concrete looked surreal. Not

Laurie Cusack

to mention the skill and the craft that lay behind the act. Matt burst out laughing, as he touched the soft-post when he walked by it.

Tommy had spent the last part of his working life as a grave digger up at Rosemount Cemetery. Matt had found that out about him, but not much else. Tommy's cantankerous nature was a mystery. What had made him so bitter? Matt had often thought about that.

When the incense started wafting around and holy water was splashed on Tommy Giblin's coffin, Matt knew they were on the last lap.

*"May the angels lead you into paradise: may the martyrs receive you at your coming, and lead you into the holy city..."*

At the graveside a decade of the Rosary was said: Hail Mary after Hail Mary chanted in a machine gun style. Tommy was not what you'd call holy, but he had squirreled away a fist of money. He'd left instructions for an Irish funeral with all the trimmings. As he was lowered down Matt suppressed a laugh when more of Tommy's words came back to him: "Me plot better be square and snug, I'm telling yee! If it's off kilter, I'll be back to *burn...*" Tommy's vitriol had all but drained away by then. He was drifting in and out of morphine-land: all-hoarse and whisper.

After putting Tommy in the ground they regrouped for the buffet. It was then that Kathy Grimes started filling in the gaps.

"He had dazzling charm once upon a time, believe it or not," she said to Matt, as she sloshed back her second sherry. They were nibbling semi-stale sandwiches in the presbytery.

"Really?"

"Tommy and my husband Joe were like brothers, he was our best man."

"It's hard to imagine Tommy being sociable."

“Oh yes, he was a joy to be with before he went on the bottle. They were great trench men. Mean men on the spades, fierce reputations. Tommy went stupid with drink after striking that wretched cable in 1974, that killed my poor Joe – God rest his soul. Tommy took to the drink like a thirsty camel. He couldn’t get over Joe’s death, blamed himself, no matter what was said. It was the steel in Joe’s shoes that killed him, though. That’s the trouble with electricity, it’s a silent devil.”

“I’m sor- ”

“Time is a great healer – there’s nothing truer than that, Matt. They were always joking and larking around – saying the daftest things in company, like ‘*Burn the bastards,*’ excuse me French, God forgive me. Oh how we used to laugh, when one of them said that. Usually at the ganger man, when he was out of earshot. They were such *characters* – horsing around all the time. No harm in them at all.

“Real Kerry men – *mountain men*. Great company, altogether!”

Kathy was spurred on by Matt’s soft-manner. She felt his compassion. And his hazel eyes reminded her of her lost sweetheart.

“Tommy suffered for far too long. It’s cruel to let them linger, do you know that? No one wants to be a burden, I know I don’t. When I was a young one, back home in Kerry, you’d often hear of old ones taking a notion and walking off. They’d often be found in a ditch a good few miles from the house, up a quiet lane. They would let the weather take them. Somehow they knew when the time was right...”

An image of Tommy’s head tangled in briars, staring into the gloaming, flashed across Matt’s mind.

He looked at Kathy and smiled in sympathy. But what he really thought was how open to abuse a custom like that must have been: “Now’s the time for your *wee*

walk...” Oh yeah – I bet many a walk was suggested on the coldest of days, as well, Matt thought.

“More nibbles, Kathy?”

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“I’ll burn the bastard who sold you this shit, son.”

“I’ve been stu- ”

“Shut the *feck* up or else I’ll cut your *fecking* ears off.”

“But Tommy-”

“It’s bog-simple, son, short, back and sides, OK?”

“Can I-”

“You’ll look good with no ears, son.”

Tommy’s scissors were zinging like the sound of a jazz cymbal being brushed.

“Sit still, son!”

“But-”

“Ears, son?”

Matt was K-ing his tits off! He’d never experienced hallucinations as wild as this before on Ketamine. He’d sniffed too much. This new stuff was pure. He was almost K-holing for fuck’s sake! He was way out his head. An alien juke box was playing a scratched Johnny Cash number, which was jumping all over the place: “*I found my cleanest dirty shirt*” – scratch-scratch-scratch – “*Wishing Lord I was stoned*” – scratch...

Matt thought he was in a dog-rough pub; a dead man was cutting his hair; everything felt sticky; he could smell stale piss. There was menace in the air. Territory meant something here. An assortment of dossers was scattered about the place. He could hear their mutterings: “Who’s yer man?” “Looks a right cunt” “A wee tot to start the day is the only way, sunshine.” “Slainte!” “Down the old Gregory Peck, then.” “Too fucking true, Jimmy.” Matt tried to get out of his chair, but it was useless, he felt cemented in – “*Sunday morning coming down*” – scratch-scratch-scratch...

These people are on the bones of their arses, Matt thought, trying to get a grip, he felt jittery. Is this hell?

“No... ” He yelled out.

Matt was deep in the K-hole. *Idiot!* He’d only wanted a buzz: not the full fucking Monty. His dealer had dropped some stuff off the other day: “This is dynamite *sniff*, geezer – mind how you go, hey, toodle-oo.” Why hadn’t he listened? Toodle-fucking-ooo! There’s no eject button in the K-hole. *Shit.* Tommy’s scissors were really whipping around his head now. And the squeaky-snip of them was tearing tufts of Matt’s hair out. Tommy’s scissors were blunt for fuck’s sake!

“Why horse anaesthetic, anyway, son?”

But before Matt could answer he felt himself being winched up and up and up until he was looking down on his own body. He could see Tommy snipping away. And a *terrible-beauty* started filling the boozier as he floated above all the grot. Where had he heard that?

He’d never felt like this before – gone this far.

Matt was spiralling about – zipping through matter: he was being sucked deeper and deeper in to the K-hole. He was air – a particle of air zinging between

the notes that filled the pub. Matt was passing through people – passing through flesh. Passing through the bar, zooming through the jukebox. He whizzed on the scratches. He was the scratch. Matt felt he was in on everything; felt he had a handle on all things. He could move through anything. But as he zoomed through Tommy he pinged back to the ceiling.

Tommy looked up at him.

Only then did Matt truly get an angle on Tommy's life.

The spirit of Giblin's old fireplace entered Matt's soul as he hovered over Tommy's family's thatched house on a sunny day in Kerry seventy years ago. He could see Tommy as a young buck heading for Dingle. Tommy was skipping down the hillside on his way to hurling practice. He looked in fine fettle, not a bother on him. Bliss. But he'd forgotten to close the lower gate. The cattle were running amuck on the family's vegetable patch. Then his father stomping down to Dingle after him with a belt clenched in his hand, a thunder-puss on his face. Tommy's beating in front of Dingle's finest. "You won't leave it open again will yee," his father kept shouting, as he belted and belted him on that windy field.

"I can see why you left, now," Matt said.

"A stone Buddha deserves all the bird shit it gets. I'm a firm believer in that, son."

And tears rolled down Tommy's cheeks on to his scissors. "If I'd only taken the notion and waved my skinny arms like a tall flower in the wind – but who would've *burnt the bastards* then? You want to give that flower malarkey a try, son. It could've worked for me."

"What is this *paddywhackery*?"

"Peel back the letters, son"



*“What?”*

Matt was clinging on.

“I’m Astral-fucking travelling through a shit-hole,” Matt wailed.

“Right enough, son, right enough!”

“Am I being broken by the bodies I bury, Tommy, is that it?”

“Smash your solar-yoke, son!”

“Hey?”

“Knock on the sky and listen to the sound.”

Then Matt started whizzing around the pub again.

It was all too much!

It might take him years to come to terms with Tommy’s words. Matt was damned certain of that, if nothing else. He thought he was losing his mind entirely when he started zipping through things again. But the K was waning a bit now. He felt the drag of being forced down in to his own body again. And the dead weight of it thwacked his mind. He felt his body’s uselessness once again. CHRIST! Then the K-hole spat him out. And as he lay there, panting, sore and bruised, aching pain came. He felt as if he’d been walking on his elbows and knees for ages. His head was pounding. Matt was scraped and shook up like a small dog that’s just been clipped by a car’s undercarriage and knows it’s had a lucky escape. He stared up, all blurry eyed, from the carpet, at his wrecked flat.

“What’s all this red stuff?” he, mumbled.

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Matt’s cosmic haircut would stay with him forever.

He was in casualty. He'd been laying on a gurney for hours. He'd often tell jokes about time wasters. Now he was one.

"Never again," Matt grunted.

To cap it off, a nurse with tweezers was painstakingly picking shards of glass out of his gashed scalp before they stitched his head back up.

Matt was still getting the odd K-flash.

Then a massive white lightning thought suddenly struck his mind that sent a shiver right through him.

"Try and stay still," the nurse said.

*He'd burn his bastard-chattels. Kick his job in to touch. And vamoose!*

*Let go, he'd just let go...*

His heart raced at the simplicity of it. Nothing would grind him down again.

*Compassion, compassion, compassion.*

An orange glow of a robe near a pagoda and a path of weeds lit his mind.

Matt's heart pounded like a tabla being put through its paces.

*Cheers, Tommy, cheers, MOUNTAIN MAN,* Matt yelled, deep inside himself.

"You said you tripped over in your flat? Always happens when you least expect it, doesn't it?" the nurse said, with a knowing smile.



