

THAT OLD COUNTRY MUSIC

Stories

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CANONGATE

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WHO'S-DEAD MCCARTHY

You'd see him coming on O'Connell Street – the hanging jaws, the woeful trudge, the load. You'd cross the road to avoid him but he'd have spotted you, and he would draw you into him. The wind would travel up Bedford Row from the Shannon to take the skin off us and add emphasis to the misery. The main drag was the daily parade for his morbidity. Limerick, in the bone evil of its winter, and here came Con McCarthy, haunted-looking, in his enormous, suffering overcoat. The way he sidled in, with the long, pale face, and the hot, emotional eyes.

'Did you hear who's dead?' he whispered.

Con McCarthy was our connoisseur of death. He was its most knowing expert, its deftest elaborater. There was no death too insignificant for his delectation. A 96-year-old poor dear in Thomondgate with the lungs papery as moths' wings and the maplines of the years cracking her lips as she whispered her feeble last in the night – Con would have word of it by the

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breakfast, and he would be up and down the street, his sad recital perfecting as he went.

‘Elsie Sheedy?’ he’d try. ‘You must have known poor Elsie. With the skaw leg and the little sparrow’s chin? I suppose she hadn’t been out much this last while. She was a good age now but I mean Jesus, all the same, Elsie? Gone?’

His eyes might turn slowly upwards here, as though in trail of the ascending Elsie.

‘She’d have been at the Stella Bingo often,’ he’d reminisce, with the whites of the eyes showing. ‘Tuesdays and Thursdays. Until the leg gave out altogether and the balance went. She used to get white-outs coming over the bridge. At one time she took the money for the tickets below at the roller disco. Inside in the little cage. Of course that wasn’t today nor yesterday.’

‘Ah no, Con. No. I didn’t know her.’

In truth, he might have no more than clapped eyes on the woman the odd time himself, but still he would retreat back into the folds of the overcoat, like a flowerhead closing when the sun goes in, and he was genuinely moved by the old lady’s passing.

Con McCarthy’s city was disappearing all around him.

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He had a special relish, it seemed to me, for the slapstick death. He’d come sauntering along at noon of

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day, now almost jaunty with the sadness, the eyes wet and wide, and he'd lean into you, and he might even have to place a palm to your shoulder to steady himself against the terrible excitement of it all.

'Can you believe it?' he said. 'A stepladder?'

'Which was this, Con?'

'Did you not hear?'

'No, Con.'

'Did you not hear who's dead?'

'Who, Con? Who?'

'Charlie Small.'

'Ah, stop.'

'The way it happened,' he said, shaking his head against what was almost a grin. 'They hadn't painted the front room since 1987. Now it isn't me that's saying this, it's the man's wife is saying this, it's Betty is saying this. She could remember it was 1987 on account of her uncle, Paddy, was home for his fiftieth. He was a fitter in Earl's Court. Since dead himself. Drowned in his own fluids, apparently. Betty was a Mullane from Weston originally. They were never toppers in the lung department. Anyhow. Charlie Small says listen, it's gone beyond the thirty-year mark, we'll paint that flippin' front room. Of course Betty's delighted. We'll get a man in, she says. No, Charlie says, it's only a small room, I'll have it done before the dinner if I start after the nine in the mornin' news. Betty strides out for a tin of paint. She comes back with a class of a peach tone. Lovely. Calming, that'll

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be, she thinks, not knowing, God love her, what's coming next, the stepladder being dragged out from under the stairs, Charlie climbing up to the top step of it, and the man ate alive from the inside out by type-2 diabetes and weakish, I suppose, on account of it and the next thing the dog's let in when it shouldn't be let in, and that little dog is saucy now, she always has been, and she goes harin' through the front room, a spaniel breed, unpredictable, and the tin of peach-coloured paint is sent flying and Charlie reaches out for it but the ladder's not set right and wobbles and next thing he's over and off the back of it and the neck is broke on the man.'

He shook his head with a blend that spoke curiously of tragic fate and happy awe.

'Dead on the floor before they got to him,' he said.

'Jesus Christ, Con.'

'The day nor the hour,' he said, and he walked away happily into the persistent rain.

*

He had about forty different faces. He would arrange his face to match precisely the tang or timbre of the death described. For the death of a child Con McCarthy's woe was fathoms deep and painfully genuine. An early death in adulthood brought a species of pinched grief about his temples, a migraine's whine its music. He avoided eye contact if it was a

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drowning that had occurred – he had an altogether dim view of the Shannon river as an utter death magnet, and he was all too often to be found down in Poor Man's Kilkee, looking out over the water, wordlessly but his lips moving, as if in silent consultation with the souls that hovered above the river, their roar at the Curragower Falls.

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His role as our messenger of death along the length of O'Connell Street and back seemed to be of a tradition. Such a figure has perhaps always walked the long plain mile of the street and spoken the necessary words, a grim but vital player in the life of a small city. But Con McCarthy's interest in death was wide-ranging, and it vaulted the city walls, so to speak, and stretched out to the world beyond to gorge intimately upon the deaths of strangers.

'Here's one for you,' he said, leaning into me one day outside the George Hotel. 'Man in Argentina, I believe it was. Cattle farmer. Impaled on his own bull. And didn't the bull go mental after it and charged in circles around the field ninety mile an hour and the poor farmer still attached to the horns with the life bled out of him. An hour and a half before a neighbour was got over with a shotgun, that long before they shot the bull and got the misfortunate corpse off the horns. Can you imagine it? The man's wife and

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children were watching, apparently. Roaring out of them. They'll never be right.'

Another day, creeping up behind me, with a light touch to my elbow, and then the lean-in, the soft whisper, and here was news of the famous dead . . .

'Zsa Zsa Gabor,' he said. 'Gone. Though I suppose it was nearly a release to the poor woman for a finish. Did you know she'd been five year on life support?'

'That I did not know, Con.'

'Five year. Heart attack at the end of it. Sure the poor heart would be weak as a little bird's in the woman's chest at that stage. I believe it was ninety-nine years of age she was. They're after plantin' her in a gold box outside in California. No woman deserve it more. A former Miss Hungary.'

*

Had he been exposed to death early, I wondered? Was it that some psychic wound had been opened at first glance into the void? Whatever the case, I believed that his condition was worsening. He began to move out from actual occurrences of death to consider in advance the shapes it might yet assume. Walking down the street now he was reading death into situations. He was seeing it everywhere. He had the realisation we all have but that most of us are wise enough to keep submerged – the knowledge that death always is close by. He'd stop to consider a building site. He'd

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look up. The long, creased face would fold into a hopeless smile, and as you passed by, he'd lean in, the head slowly shaking.

'Are you not watching?' he said.

'Which, Con?'

'See that scaffold above there? Are you not watching the wind on it? If that winds gets up at all, the whole lot could come down. A pole could go swingin'. Open your head and you walking down the road as quick as it'd look at you. And that would be an end to it.'

*

He walked the circuit of the three bridges every night. If you idled anywhere by the river of an evening you might take the slow rake of Con McCarthy's worried eye. He would try to have a good read of you. I met him one night on the far side of the river. He was on a bench, the water moving slowly past, the traffic scant but passing its few lights across the falling dark. Maybe it was the September of the year. That sense of turn and grim resolve about the days, the evenings.

'Did you not hear?' he said.

'Ah, which was this, Con?'

'Did you not hear who's dead?'

'Who, Con? Who?'

But this time he just grinned, as if he was playing with me, and he let the weak-tea smile play out loosely across the river a few moments.

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‘Ah sure look,’ he said. ‘We’re all on the way out.’

‘I know, Con. I know.’

‘Isn’t that the truth of it? For a finish?’

‘Can I talk to you seriously, Con?’

‘Hah?’

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘What?’

‘Why are you so drawn to it? To death? Why are you always the first with the bad news? Do you not realise, Con, that people cross the road when they see you coming? You put the hearts sideways in us. Oh Jesus Christ, here he comes, we think, here comes Who’s-Dead McCarthy. Who has he put in the ground for us today?’

‘I can’t help it,’ he said. ‘I find it very . . . impressive.’

‘Impressive?’

‘That there’s no gainsaying it. That no one has the answer to it. That we all have to face into the room with it at the end of the day and there’s not one of us can make the report after.’

*

I became morbidly fascinated by Con McCarthy. I asked around the town about him. I came to understand that he was in many ways a mysterious figure. Some said he came from Hyde Road, others from Ballynanty. The city was just about big enough to

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afford a measure of anonymity. You could be a great familiar of O'Connell Street but relatively unknown beyond the normal hours of the day and night. We might know broadly of your standing, your people and their afflictions, but the view would be fuzzy, the detail blurred. So it was with Con. He did not seem to hold down a job. (It was hard to imagine the workmates who could suffer him.) His occupation, plainly, was with the dead. It was difficult to age him. He was a man out of time somehow. The overcoat was vast and worn at all seasons and made him a figure from a Jack B. Yeats painting or an old Russian novel. There was something antique in his bearing. The rain that he drew down upon himself seemed to be an old, old rain. One night on William Street, I spotted him sitting late and alone in the Burgerland there over a paper cup of tea. That cup of tea was the saddest thing I ever saw. I sat in a few tables from him and watched carefully. As he sat alone his lips again moved and I have no doubt that it was a litany of names he was reciting, the names of the dead, but just barely, just a whisper enough to hoist those names that they might float above the lamps of the city.

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And maybe he was truly the sanest of us, I sometimes thought, on those nights in October when I could not sleep, and I took to driving late around the streets and

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the bridges and the town, and I knew that it was passing from me, and how remarkable it was that we can turn our minds from that which is inevitable – Con McCarthy could not turn from it. As cars came towards me at pace on the dual carriageway, sometimes for just the splinter of a moment there in the small hours I wanted to swerve and jolt into their lights and bring the taste of it onto me, the taste of its metal on my lips. Bring forward the news even if I could make no subsequent report of it.

When Con McCarthy died it was, of course, to a spectacular absence of fanfare – suddenly, unexpectedly, and rating no more than a brief line in the Chronicle ‘Deaths’ of a Tuesday in November.

Almost laughing, almost glad, I went along O’Connell Street in the rain with it; I leant in, I whispered; and softly like funeral doves I let my suffering eyes ascend . . .

‘Did you hear at all?’ I said. ‘Did you not hear who’s dead?’