**Toronto and the State of Grace**

Kevin Barry

The winter bleeds us out here. These December mornings, it is often just myself and the dead jellyfish who are left to the beach. These are the lion’s mane corpses that get washed in on the equinoctial gales and they come in terrible numbers some years, as if there’s been a genocide out there. They look like pink foetal messes flung about the sand and rocks – kids call the place the abortion beach – and the corpses are so preserved in the winter air they’re a long time rotting down. How the soul lifts on the morning stroll. Then there’s the endless afternoon to contend with – mostly, I have the bar to just myself and the radio, and we sit there and drone at each other. Maybe there’s a lone customer, a depressed old farmer down from the hills, or maybe, the odd day, there are two. I am at this stage largely beyond caring.

But it was on just such a lifeless and dreary winter day, almost precisely as our ten streetlamps came on to glow against the dusk, that the rental car pulled up outside. I could hear two voices raised in an odd, quivery singing, but the voices ceased as the engine cut. A slight man in late middle age stepped out and braced himself against the evening chill. He looked at the sign above my door – it reads *Sullivan*, still, though it’s years since there’s been a Sullivan here. He came around the car and opened the passenger door and a frail bird-faced old dear in furs emerged. He offered an arm but she was proud to manage without. They stepped up together to stare through my window and their eyes were lit so madly that my breath caught in forewarning.

They entered my pub like a squall of hectic weather. There was a kind of cheerful eeriness about them. They took grinning to the bar stools. He swivelled a half-turn and squinted as he read the spirit labels –

‘It’s an attractive selection, Mother,’ he said.  
‘Let’s not be rash, Tony,’ she said.  
But she swivelled a half-turn, too, and hers drew a slow creak to the room that sounded in a crescent-moon shape, ominously.

‘We’ll work our way across the toppermost states,’ he said.

‘Oh, Tony,’ she said. ‘Riding the Empire Builder? Again?’

He half rose from his stool –

‘Take me back to the Blaaack Hills,’ he crooned. ‘The blaaack hills of Da-kota . . .’

‘The beautiful Indian country,’ she sighed.

He was fey and thin and whippety; she had the remnants of a sharp-boned beauty yet.

‘He’s a dreadful child but kind,’ she confided, and she laid her touch to the back of my hand where it gripped with white knuckles the bar top. Hers was paper-brown and cut deep with wrinkles.

‘A Laphroaig to set us off from the station,’ he said, sitting again. ‘Let’s strap ourselves in, dear.’

‘Laphroaig, Tony? Is that the peaty number?’ ‘Like drinking the bloody fireplace,’ he said. ‘Two?’  
‘Water to the side,’ he said.

I set them and they sipped, and they considered each other with the same liquid eyes, and relaxed.

‘Have you travelled far today?’

‘Oh Christ,’ he said. ‘Was it Kenmare, Mother? Was the last place?’

‘Horrendous,’ she said, and placed thin fingers to her throat in long suffering.

‘Full of horrible skinny Italians on bicycles,’ he said. ‘Calves on like knitting needles and their rude bits in Lycra. I mean it’s bloody December!’

‘In fact,’ she said, ‘we were rather run out of town.’

‘There was an incident,’ he confirmed, ‘over supper.’

‘Last night?’ she said. ‘We’re barely in the door and there’s talk of the guards.’

‘Five-star melodrama,’ he said. ‘Matinée and evening performances.’

‘We had . . . stopped off,’ she said. ‘En route.’ ‘We were a little . . . tired,’ he said.  
‘We thought we’d take things more gently today,’ she said.  
‘Nonsense,’ he said. ‘We’re riding the Empire Builder. We’re taking the high ground. Is that a Cork gin I see?’

It was second along the line of optics from the Laphroaig – I thought, surely they can’t be in earnest? There was a line of nine spirits turned and hung along there.

‘Mine’s with just the tiniest drizzle of soda water,’ she said.

‘Mine’s a slice of lime, if you have it,’ he said.  
‘To be honest . . .’  
‘Surprise me,’ he said. ‘Straight up is fine. Though I may become poisonous and embittered.’  
‘Given you’ve a head start,’ she said.  
‘Do you see now?’ he said. ‘Do you see now what I’m dealing with?’  
I tried for what I imagined was a half-smile and set their gins.  
‘One yourself?’ he said.  
‘I don’t, actually.’  
Sobriety was the mean violet of dusk through the bar’s window; the mean view down the falling fields to the never-ending sea; the violet of another mean winter for me.

‘Toronto!’ she cried.  
‘Oh Mother,’ he said. ‘It’s barely gone five.’ ‘Anthony was conceived in Toronto,’ she said. ‘I was Ophelia to Daddy’s Prince. We’re talking 1953, barman.’ He didn’t look sixty. He had the faded yellowish skin tone of a preserved lemon. Pickled, I suppose is what I’m trying to say, but it seems unkind.

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Their moods came and went with each sip as it was taken. He took a sullen turn on the Cork gin –

‘Kenmare was the fucking horrors,’ he said. ‘I had one of my spells.’

‘He hasn’t had a spell since September,’ she said. ‘Not saying October was a picnic.’

‘Five this morning?’ he said. ‘I’m lying in the bed, my heart is going like gangbusters and there are bloody crows on the roof – crows! And they’re at their screeching and their bloody cawing and the worst of it is I can make out the words.’

I couldn’t but ask –

‘You don’t want to know,’ he said. ‘Suffice to say I’ve always suspected the worst of crows.’

‘A crow is a crow,’ she flapped a wrist. ‘It’s the rooks you want to watch out for.’

‘Oh, a rook knows,’ he said.  
‘Knows?’  
‘The day and the hour,’ he said.  
‘Sleep is a thing of the past for me,’ she said. ‘You’ll find this as you get older, boys.’

The bar was empty but for them. I just wanted to lock up for the day and not open for the night. I wanted to drink mint tea upstairs and watch television and go on the internet. But they were making light work of the Cork gin.

‘It was a dry town,’ she said, narrowing her eyes, ‘was Toronto.’

‘Hideous Protestant bastards,’ he said. ‘What’s this is next along?’

I turned, coldly; I tried to look stern.

‘I’m afraid that’s a very cheap and nasty Spanish brandy.’

‘How did you know I was coming?’ he said.

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The moving sea gleamed; it moved its lights in a black glister; it moved rustily on its cables.

‘Of course Daddy was several years senior to me,’ she said. ‘I was a young Ophelia. He was an old Prince.  
Oh but *impressive*. He had range, had Daddy.’

‘Do you realise,’ he said, ‘that my father was born in 1889?’

‘My goodness.’

‘Picture it,’ he said, swirling the last of his gin and signalling for two brandies; she’d already finished hers and had her palms placed expectantly on the bar top.

‘1889,’ he said. ‘This was in County Mayo. In a cabin, no less, and in low circumstances. A whore mother bleeding down the thighs and seventeen screaming bastards swinging from the rafters . . .’

‘Anthony,’ she said. ‘Really.’

‘To even emerge from such a milieu,’ he said, ‘walking upright and not on all fours speaks of some- thing heroic in the old lech.’

‘He carried himself well,’ she said. ‘Daddy had class always.’

‘Meaning?’ he said.

‘Apples and trees, dear,’ she said. ‘You’ve got some, too.’

‘Some?’ he said.

Together they tested their brandies with tentative lips.

‘Coca-Cola,’ she said, and I set a small bottle for a mixer.

‘I shouldn’t,’ he said. ‘The caffeine doesn’t agree with me.’

He took a hard nip from his Spanish – suspiciously – but smiled then and looked up with new glee and blew the room a kiss. Then he was halfways stood on the stool again.

‘When they begiiiin,’ he sang, ‘the beguine . . .’

He slithered from the bar stool and waltzed a slow- shoed shuffle as though with his own ghost.

‘Quiero sentir las cosas de siempre,’ he sang, loudening, and he turned cock-hipped on a heel.

‘Julio Iglesias,’ she said.

The door opened and one of my poor farmers poked a glance in –

‘When they begin,’ he came to quick refrain, ‘the beguine,’ and he waltzed towards the door – my farmer turned and moved off down the village, sharpish.

Tony grabbed the door and shouted to the night after him –

‘Come back at half past eight, darling! I’ll be doing my Burl Ives!’

The chill of the evening faded again as he let the door swing closed and he took happily to his bar stool.

‘Toronto?’ she said. ‘The house was half empty most nights but the company was lively.’

‘Evidently,’ he said.

‘I think it happened the very first time,’ she said. ‘He’d got his hands on a bathtub gin, had Daddy.’

‘The telling detail,’ he said.

‘Tasted like turps,’ she said, ‘but it did make one pleasantly lightheaded.’

He squinted again at the line of optics and shook his head.

‘Now my wife?’ he said. ‘Don’t, Tony,’ she said.

‘Oh and by the way,’ he said. ‘What did you say your name was?’

‘I didn’t. I’m Alan.’

‘Well, Al,’ he said, ‘it turns out that my darling wife has only taken off with the pilates instructor. A she. And twice the man I’ll ever be.’

‘You should never have married an actress, darling.’ ‘So you’ve been saying this last fourteen years, Mother.’ ‘Marry the shop girl,’ she said. ‘Marry the factory line. Marry the barmaid. MARRY THE WHORE! But never, never marry the actress, Tony.’

‘Well, it’s a little late for it, Mother.’

‘Of course in Toronto,’ she said, ‘there wasn’t a great deal to do in the evenings. And the show’d finish for seven!’

‘He gave her one down the fish dock.’  
‘Oh Tony,’ she said.  
‘By the mighty Ontario,’ he said.  
‘Folks,’ I said, ‘listen, I mean really . . .’ ‘County Mayo-style,’ he said. ‘You know what I mean, soldier?’  
‘Tony,’ she said, disappointedly.  
‘As for my betrothed? I said, Well! I said, This pilates has given you a whole new lease of life, Martina. You’ve come in glowing and you’re up to four sessions a week.’

‘What’s this is next along the line, Andy?’

‘Alan,’ I said, and submitted to my fate. The way they moved was sure as a tide.

‘It’s an Absolut vodka,’ I said.

‘Marvellous,’ he said. ‘One minute we’re rock- chewing Spanish peasants humping the donkey in a humid night wind . . .’

‘Humid!’ she cried.

‘. . . the next we’re on the porch of the dacha, it’s a summer’s evening, placid . . .’

‘Placid,’ she said. ‘A light breeze licking the trees.’

‘Pine-scented secrets,’ he said. ‘Cruel handsome souls with cheekbones like knives. Burly intrigue . . .’

‘Burl Ives,’ she said.

‘. . . and some rather fetching Cossack-type head- gear. A tubercular old sort about to hack his last . . .’

I poured and set the vodkas over ice – they slammed them back neat.

‘Of course Martina’s not been right since the change,’ he said.

‘Her manners are learned,’ said his mother. ‘There was always something forced about her manners. As if she’d learned them by heart. From a library book.’

‘Pilates!’ he cried. ‘If it wasn’t for the kiddies, it’d be a clean break.’

‘The kiddies were a disaster,’ she said. ‘At your age? I don’t know what you were thinking, Anthony.’

‘Prolonging the noble line,’ he said. ‘1889 . . . Oh . . . Is that a Drambuie, Adam?’

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The alcohol appeared really to have no great effect – it just kept them moving at a spinning clip.

‘He never talked about Mayo much, Daddy,’ she said.

‘You could hardly blame the man,’ he said.

‘Though he told a horrid tale. About the day his father decided that *his* wife, Daddy’s mother, was a brasser type, essentially. He stood at the bottom of the stairs and screamed the foullest abuse up at her. Then she flung a loaf of bread down and hit him on the head. Your daddy, as a kiddie, is watching the whole thing from under a table. The poor infant! And next *his* daddy flings the bread back up again and roars . . .’

She half stood on the bar stool and reddened as she called the line –

‘“Feed your fucking bastards with it!”’

‘Is it any wonder I turned out the way I did?’ Tony said.

‘Folks,’ I said. ‘In truth, I’m not feeling the best this evening, I think it’s a virusy thing and I may lock up a little earlier . . .’

‘Mine’s a Drambuie, Al,’ she said.  
‘Times two,’ he said.  
I set the glasses and poured.  
‘He talked about that loaf of bread for sixty years,’ she said.  
‘Martina and I? That first weekend? We never left the bed. Of course this was the eighties and we were extremely tanned and fit. Tenerife, matinées and evenings? That’ll keep you in your skinny jeans.’

‘Always it would come up,’ she said. ‘The morning it all went bananas. Back in Mayo. Back in the . . . Was it a cottage, Tony?’

‘It was a cabin.’

‘From what I could gather that was the last he ever saw of his father. The morning of the loaf of bread flung.’

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It was by now fully night outside; the road was deserted.

‘Daddy did a turn,’ she said. ‘In his day. As a lady?’ ‘Oh?’  
‘Coeur d’Alene,’ she said. ‘We were hired for the Empire Builder. Lounge-car floorshow. 1957. Oh and Daddy was at his peak! This was before the tragedy, of course. He went as Dame Delilah. He was got up buxom. He was got up blonde. Tony was still on the bottle. Tony was still in the cot but it seeps in, does talent.’

‘I was four,’ he said, and a tiny tear came. ‘Riding the High Line!’

‘I’ll admit Daddy’s nerves were not right,’ she said. ‘What he’d been through, the trauma? He had . . . He had what I used to call his *things*. Which were some- thing like Anthony’s spells, actually. Come to think of it. But Daddy? Well! For example, he couldn’t see a shoe on a bed. If he saw a shoe on a bed, he wouldn’t be right for weeks.’

‘A shoe on a bed? This is new to me,’ he said. ‘You were four,’ she said.  
‘Now I’m going to have a thing,’ he said, ‘about shoes on beds.’  
She smiled, and she rose up suddenly, at the shoulders, and her eyes brightened ever more gladly, and she gasped her last. Then she keeled over dead onto my bar counter. There was no question about it. The way her head snapped onto the counter top. She just went. There was no question of a passing out; there was no question of the one too many. This was Death on the premises. A single hard snap of bone on wood. He looked at her. He looked at me. He looked at her again, and coldly –

‘Oh you haven’t,’ he said.

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The one road along the peninsula is a bad one, and we are at least a half-hour from Castletown of a winter’s night. Which is an ignoble length of time for a woman dead on a bar stool. Together we carried her to the lounge seating and laid her out crookedly there. Her knees wouldn’t straighten. I went upstairs to get a sheet. I didn’t know what I was thinking or doing. I was panicked. I fetched a brown paper bag to breathe in. I took the sheet off the bed; it was like wrestling an octopus. But it covered her, at least, and I spoke stupidly then, intemperately –

‘I suppose the shock would tend to sober you.’ ‘Oh no,’ Tony said. ‘I’m still roaringly drunk.’ He looked up at the optics.  
‘Where were we, Al?’

Next along the line was a Baileys, and I poured a pair of them over ice, and I sat with him on the lounge chairs as we sipped.

‘They must have been happy in Toronto,’ he said. ‘Or at least had some kind of fuck glow.’

From the gap in the mountain the ambulance was seen at last to spin its lights and to call out and as quickly again its men were in the door and about us. Tony went in the back of the ambulance with his mother. The last that I saw, his head was bobbing in the moving light as he yapped and cried and gesticulated.

I went upstairs with the rest of the bottle of Baileys poured into a pint glass filled with ice. I googled toxicology reports and I googled liability. I googled the Empire Builder and I could hear it as it moved across the mountains and the plains –

Winona.  
Wolf Point.  
Coeur d’Alene.  
I had to get out for a bit. I walked down the cold road to the beach and it was just me and the dead jellyfish and my eyes stung with cold and all the silvers of the sea came and entered me there on the white sand like the surface of the moon pocked and cratered and the jellyfish lay dead and translucent all around me and I just lay where I had fallen into this night of void and stars and I thought oh Jesus, oh God, it’s so fucking cold now.

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