

tír na nóg

stories

the devil is in the detail

street tales of childhood

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‘Auntie Mary’s’

Auntie Mary, my mother’s elder sister of the glorious, flaming red hair — a characteristic that was to re-appear in the family after skipping a generation — lived below us in the middle flat at 50 Lydford Road, Paddington.

It was the early nineteen-fifties. When my mother was at work we were in and out of ‘Auntie Mary’s’ — as we called Auntie Mary and Uncle Jim’s flat. She would welcome us into her kitchen, the family living space, and give us each a slice of bread and jam, perhaps the rare treat of a biscuit, and, occasionally, a story.

Mary and Jean, my sisters, and I would sit down on the floor by the fire along with our cousins, Brian, Ann and John. We hoped we would get a story before uncle Jim arrived home from work. It might be a story of Ireland — the banshee, leprechauns, headless horsemen, fortune-telling, saints and relics; or it might be from the war — the blitz, the blackout, the bombers, the doodlebugs.

Uncle Jim, Mr Matter-of-fact, couldn’t tell a story to save his life. But he did have a grasp of relevant facts. When he could be persuaded to explain something, it would become, in its own way, for me, an exciting adventure into the unknown.

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The Devil is in the Detail

Jack Spratt could eat no fat
His wife could eat no lean
And so betwixt the two of them
They licked the platter clean.
— traditional nursery rhyme

Thunder and lightning is no lark
When Dublin city is in the dark...
— traditional Irish folk song

A Scorcher

It was one of those precious days: from the moment I woke up I knew for certain it was going to be a scorcher. And that meant swimming in King Edward's open-air pool. It was bright and already hot by 10 o'clock. With my swimming costume wrapped neatly in a towel, I called round for my mate, Chubby. His nickname came from his surname, Chubb. It couldn't have come from his appearance — we were both as skinny as rakes. He was sometimes called 'Lock-up' by the older boys in the street, although at the time Chubby and I didn't know why.

The sun was so hot, we couldn't wait to jump into the pool. The cold of the water took my breath away. It made for a short dip, just long enough to swim to the other end of the pool and hop out smartly. Then it was up on to the unbearably hot corrugated tin roofs of the changing cubicles to sunbathe on our towels. And back into the pool to cool off... We were striving for that elusive golden brown tan. We returned instead

with a painful pinky-red freckled look, which we hoped, as it darkened, would turn us into greek gods; we yearned in vain for the freckles to join up. Only, just as the burning-red was easing and mellowing into what might have passed for a genuine tan, without fail, the skin would start peeling off.

Blue Tongue Disease

On our way home, thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. We popped into Cyril's corner shop to buy dark blue lolly-ices, and emerged as the bright afternoon became sultry and increasingly humid. Dark storm clouds loomed unseen at our backs.

We turned into Lydford Road with the lolly-ices stuck in our gobs, itching to poke our diseased-looking tongues out at anyone we met. No chance. The normally busy street was eerily deserted.

The pavements, scrawled with drawings and hopscotch markings, were too hot and dusty to play on; even the concrete copings, at the top and bottom of the steps leading up to the houses, where you would expect some grown-ups to gather as well as kids, were too hot for leg and hand. It was the sort of day you could really believe that eggs would cook on the searing, sun-baked pavements. And nary a soul about.

But our turning the corner, seemed to be a signal for something far more dramatic than the tongue-poking we had planned: one great, one huge spot of water, surely way too big to be a simple raindrop, slapped the pavement in front of us. As big and glistening as a new half-crown. We stared at it in disbelief, before looking upwards to see where it had come from. And there, right above us, the edge of an almost black, glowering cloud swiftly invaded the light blue sky, like ink spilt and spreading on a page.

Suddenly, the pavement started to fizz with more huge raindrops. We didn't stand long to marvel at the rain now falling heavily through what was still stunning bright sunshine, nor to look for the rainbow that we knew might be arching somewhere in that summer stormy sky.

Wet Wet Wet

Instead, we looked briefly at each other and then started to run for it — the hundred yards or so to number fifty. Seconds later, the raindrops

were bouncing up from the pavement around us; the next moment we were running through stair rods of rain, splashing through puddles, water flooding our plimsolls.

Finally we slowed down. We were soggy anyway. We chugged along the gutter, now a fast flowing stream which gurgled noisily into the drains, and started splashing, stamping and kicking up sprays at each other. Now we were well and truly gloriously drenched — we couldn't get any wetter.

Ronny and Nobby from number forty-eight ran out to enjoy the deluge. Their mother, Nora, bellowed at them to get in out of the rain. Too late. By the time the pair reached the bottom of their steps they were soaked through. More kids came out to paddle in the gutters and to join the splashing water fights.

Without warning, sheet-lightning flickered and flashed in a continuous blitz, illuminating the whole street in an uncanny, brilliant white light, freeze-framing jerky silver robots splashing about. We 'Ooohed' and 'Aaahed' with each flash. Help, though belated, was at hand for Nora, the brief display of lightning was followed by an ear-splitting crash of thunder. Nobby, Ronny, Chubby and I took fright and fled indoors.

Scared and fascinated at once, we huddled behind the half open door at number fifty, watching the water cascading off the copings and steps and forming rivulets running across the pavements, washing away the hopscotch lines that had stood chalked there for weeks and weeks. One or two kids lingered outside determined to brave the downpour and to join the ranks of the gloriously soaked.

Another flash of lightning, and, this time, an instantaneous, deafening crash of thunder, as if the sky was cracking and falling, put paid to their bravado and sent them scurrying home. It drove us away from the front door and along the hallway to the safety of Auntie Mary's kitchen.

A Double Rainbow

In the kitchen, Auntie Mary was sitting calmly at the table with her cigarette and her cup of tea. Our cousins gathered by the window, were staring into the rain outside, waiting for the next flash of lightning, the next thunderbolt from the heavens. Auntie Mary got up, gave us a towel to dry ourselves, produced a tin and gave us each a biscuit. Then she went and looked out of the window, glancing up at the sky as if expecting some hidden sign. More lightning, and, shortly after, more scary

thunder.

“The storm is moving away now,” she said matter-of-factly, reassuringly, but with a knowing hint of mystery.

“How can you tell?” I asked, intrigued by her certainty. There was no let-up in the storm. The rain was still hammering down noisily. But the only reply I got, or would get, was another knowing look and that trace of a smile. Before I could continue with my questions, Bobby Stevens, who lived in the basement flat, was shouting from the door,

“There’s a rainbow! — A *double* rainbow!”

The rain was easing by the time we reached the front door. There in the sky was the double rainbow. One full semi-circle, a swathe of pure, vibrant colour, and, above, a second partial rainbow, well defined at each end, with hardly any colour in the middle of its great arc.

The Devil’s Rainbow

Auntie Mary followed the mad rush from the kitchen.

“The rainbow is a sign of God’s promise to Noah that he will not flood the earth again.”

Solemn words to fit the occasion. She paused to make sure we were taking it in before continuing,

“As for the second rainbow above, that’s the Devil’s rainbow; you can always tell: it’s weak and the colours are upside down — a poor imitation of God’s rainbow.”

We stood transfixed by the sheer splendour of the spectacle. Auntie Mary’s commentary was as usual entertaining, but her introduction of the Devil was unsettling. Sure enough the second rainbow *was* more faint and the colours *were* in the reverse order. She waited to make sure we had checked it out and found it to be true.

“Archangel Lucifer was the brightest star in God’s sky. He was a reflection of God’s beauty in that night sky. In the daytime, Lucifer was put in charge of the rainbow, God’s most beautiful daytime creation above the earth. But Lucifer turned away from God. He committed the sin of pride — perhaps he thought that the rainbow was a reflection of his own glory — in any case, he just got too big for his boots. So God sent the archangel Michael to banish Lucifer — forever.” Auntie Mary emphasised the finality of ‘forever’ with a series of slow, solemn nods.

“And now the only reminder of Lucifer in the heavens is that faded ‘Devil’s rainbow’ you sometimes see.” she scoffed.

She left a silence, which allowed the rainbows and the Devil to hang in the air. She knew she had our full attention now, and she continued, brightly,

"Everyone sees the rainbow differently; they each see their very own rainbow. In Ireland, I could look across the fields when I was out, and see where my rainbow landed. Sometimes I would run there to get the crock of gold left hanging at the rainbow's end by the leprechauns." Auntie Mary looked at us to see if we were still hanging on her every word — and of course we were — and she smiled almost mischievously, a gleam in her eye, as she delivered her parting shot,

"It looks like the end of my rainbow will be by St. Vincent's. If you get up there quickly before the rainbow fades, you can bring me back that crock of gold." Auntie Mary returned to her kitchen leaving us wide-eyed.

I was still finding it hard to imagine an Archangel in toe-pinching, hobnail boots. What was Lucifer's sin of pride? Surely, God wouldn't have kicked him out 'forever' for swanning it in front of the mirror? Auntie Mary, on balance, we thought, believed in Lucifer, the Devil. So the image of the Devil and his inferior rainbow stayed with us long after the rainbows faded, and it was hard to switch as nimbly as Auntie Mary had done to her (God's) rainbow and the leprechauns. We could take them and the crock of gold with a pinch of salt. But the Devil, with what we had been taught at Catholic Sunday School at St Vincent's, he was altogether a different ball game.

Before we could decide whether the run up to St Vincent's would be worth the candle, Uncle Jim arrived home on his motor bike with its shiny black sidecar. He stood shaking rain from his cape, looking up with us at the rainbows in the sky.

How Fast Does the Penny Drop?

"Uncle Jim, how do you know when a thunderstorm is moving away?" I asked the question as he stood on one leg in the hallway, wobbling as he pulled a boot off. Steadying himself, he replied,

"By the gap between the lightning and the thunder. Light travels faster than sound, so, the bigger the gap between the lightning and the thunder the further away the storm."

I nodded. But I didn't really understand, and now, when he was climbing out of his wet clothes, was not the best time to press for a clearer explanation.

Later that evening, while he was working on his wireless in his bedroom, I asked him to explain in more detail. This is what he said:

“Well, light travels at 186,000 miles per second. Sound only travels at about 750 miles per hour in air, very slow in comparison. So, when you get the sort of electrical explosion that occurs in a thunderstorm, the light from the explosion — the lightning — reaches you almost immediately. The sound of the explosion — the thunder — travels a mile in about five seconds. “To decide how far away the storm is: count the seconds between the lightning and the thunder and for every five seconds elapsed, the storm is a mile away. That’s called the ‘five second’ rule. So if the storm is on top of you, the lightning and the thunder will be close together. And if you count ten seconds between the lightning and the thunder, applying the ‘five second’ rule, the storm is — How far away, David?”

“Two miles”, I had the answer, instantly. This was fun; uncle Jim was impressed:

“Well done!” Uncle Jim turned back to his wireless.

Auntie Mary’s Secret

Now I understood. I was in the know. I was tempted to ask him if that explained Auntie Mary’s knowing look and smile. But I reckoned that it would be a question too far. He had been more than usually expansive and I decided instead to ask,

“But what makes a rainbow appear?”

“It’s the combination of rain and the sun being visible”, he answered, still intent on his array of dials and knobs. I coughed, feeling at once apologetic and downcast. He glanced up, forgot about his radio for a moment, and concentrated on explaining to me as clearly as he could, “When it’s raining and the rays of the sun enter a raindrop, the back of the raindrop acts like a mirror to reflect the sun’s rays back to you. But the raindrop does more than behave like a mirror. It also acts as a prism, splitting the light entering the raindrop into separate colours.”

He drew a diagram showing the path of the sun’s rays through a circular drop of water.

“Some of the sun’s rays enter the raindrop and the white light is split into the colours that make up sunlight — the rainbow colours. Now each colour is bent at a slightly different angle as it enters the raindrop, so when it is reflected at the back of the raindrop, it comes out again

separated from the other colours. And what you see is the rainbow. See?"

I tried to look grateful and to hide my puzzlement at the same time. He went on, trying to make things even clearer to me,

"The colours at the red end of the spectrum bend a bit less than those at the blue end, with the result that the red is at the top of the rainbow and the blue is at the bottom. Light and colours are reflected in all directions, but the strongest concentration of each rainbow colour makes an angle of about 40 degrees with the direction of the sunbeams, and forms your rainbow. The direction of the sunbeams is parallel to the line running from the top of your head to the end of your shadow. The end of your shadow is the centre of the arc of the rainbow and you can see the end of the rainbow against different backgrounds, the sky, trees, distant buildings..." He trailed off.

Uncle Jim seemed to be on a roll — a chance to see if he had the facts on something at the front of my mind:

"But what about the Devil's rainbow?" I asked daringly; *wickedly* even. Uncharacteristically, he smiled. This was interesting, very interesting.

"I don't know about the 'Devil's' rainbow," he ventured, looking at me quizzically, "but I can tell you about the 'secondary' rainbow. If that's what you mean?" he enquired. I nodded enthusiastically, eager to hear more about the rainbow, but disappointed that I wasn't going to get the lowdown on its shady owner. Uncle Jim had performed a neat sidestep: the Devil was definitely *not* going to be in the detail.

"A smaller proportion of the light rays hit the raindrop at a more tangential angle and are reflected twice inside the raindrop, before coming back out. The result of this double reflection is that the secondary rainbow has its colours in the reverse order: violet at the top and red at the bottom. The concentration of these fewer rays form a lesser rainbow which makes an angle of about 50 degrees."

I didn't understand most of it even with Uncle Jim's diagrams, but I did recognize that here was a factual but interesting explanation. I was determined to understand, one day, the mathematics and science which gave such precise answers as 40 and 50 degrees. And it seemed that one of Auntie Mary's assertions, namely, that everyone saw their own rainbow, was not so fanciful after all.

Fact and Fiction

That was the difference between Auntie Mary and Uncle Jim. Uncle Jim knew his science. He knew the explanations but would give his answer matter-of-factly, without embellishment; sometimes in very few words. Auntie Mary, showed little inclination to explain anything in terms of real facts... She would volunteer a story, shrouded in mystery, in magic, romance, religious interpretation and pure fantasy, and with style; but some of it she did believe was the truth. That was it with Auntie Mary: it was hard to know exactly what was what. I just couldn't tell what she believed and what she held tongue-in-cheek. Whenever I pressed her for a fuller explanation, she would just say, "Ask your Uncle Jim."

Uncle Jim hadn't a clue how to tell stories but he was a whiz with facts and explanations. For me, when I could get him to elaborate, the facts conjured up their own excitement and sense of wonderment; the explanations, in their turn, made an adventure of the facts.

Auntie Mary's experience of storms and Uncle Jim's experience of storms were very different. Yet each had its own attraction. For me, if only Auntie Mary would include the facts in her story; or if only Uncle Jim would make a story out of his knowledge. They really were: Jack Spratt and his wife. They really were.

Auntie Mary and Uncle Jim

Seated at the same table

Uncle Jim just chewed the facts

Auntie Mary dined on fable