

Draft

tír na nóg

stories

the devil is in the detail

a street tale of childhood david white

2002 LONDON 2002

“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 in Paddington.

It was the early nineteen-fifties, and when my mother was at work we were in and out of “Auntie Mary’s” — as we called Uncle Jim and Auntie Mary’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.

As children, Mary and Jean, my sisters, and I would sit down on the floor by the fire along with my cousins, Brian, Ann and John, before uncle Jim arrived home from work, hoping we would get a story. These might be stories of Ireland — the banshee, leprechauns, headless horsemen; they might be from the war — the blitz, the blackout, the bombers, and the doodlebugs.

copyright 2002: all rights reserved

No part of this story may be reprinted or reproduced or by any electronic, mechanical or other means including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval systems without permission in writing from the author.

Contents

The Devil is in the Detail

A Scorcher	1
Blue Tongue Disease	2
Wet Wet Wet	3
A Double Rainbow	4
The Devil's Rainbow	5
How Fast Does the Penny Drop?	6
Auntie Mary's Secret	7
Fact and Fiction	9

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 days: from the moment I woke up I knew for certain it was going to be a scorcher. It was bright and already hot by 10 o'clock when, with my swimming costume wrapped neatly in a towel, I called for my mate, Chubby. His nickname came from his surname, Chubb — it would have been ironic otherwise, as we were both as skinny as rakes. He was sometimes called 'Lock-up' by the older boys in the street, although at the time we didn't know why.

The day was hot, but the cold water in King Edward's open air pool took my breath away, and 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 the unbearably hot

corrugated tin roofs of the changing cubicles to sunbathe on our towels, my goose-pimpled skin drying in the sun; and back into the pool again.

On our way home thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. We popped into Cyril's corner shop to buy dark blue lolly-ices, emerging into the bright but sultry and increasingly humid afternoon, with dark storm clouds looming at our backs.

Blue Tongue Disease

We turned into Lydford Road with the lolly-ices sticking out of our gobs, ready to poke our diseased-looking tongues at anyone we met. No chance. Eerily, the normally busy street was deserted. Not a soul about. A lull before a storm?

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 where you would expect some grown-ups as well as kids to gather, were too hot for bare legs and hands. It was the sort of day you could believe that eggs would cook on the searing, sun-baked pavements. That would explain it.

But our turning the corner, besides appearing to clear the street of all forms of life, seemed to be a signal for something more dramatic than we were planning: one great, huge spot of rain, as big and glistening as a new half-crown, slapped the pavement in front of us. We stared at it. Surely it was way too big to be just a raindrop. In disbelief we looked upwards. And there, above us, the edge of an almost black, glowering cloud was spreading swiftly across the light blue

sky.

Suddenly the pavement started to fizz with more of these huge raindrops. We didn't stand long to marvel at the rain as it fell heavily through the amazing bright sunshine, or to look for the rainbow that we knew would have to be about somewhere in that summer storm sky.

Wet Wet Wet

Instead, we looked briefly at each other and then started to run for it — the hundred or so yards 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 in puddles, water flooding our plim-solls. Finally we slowed down. We were drenched anyway; we couldn't get any wetter. We splashed on in the gutter now a fast flowing stream gurgling into the drains.

Ronny and Nobby from number forty-eight had run out to enjoy the deluge. Their mother, Norah, shouted at them to get in out of the rain, But it was too late. By the time they reached the bottom of their steps they were soaked through. More kids came out to paddle in the gutters and join in splashing water fights.

However, belated help was at hand for Norah. Without warning, sheet lightning flashed almost continuously, illuminating the whole street in an unnaturally brilliant white light, and frame-freezing the splashers into jerky silver robots. Close behind came an ear-splitting crash of thunder. Nobby, Ronnie, Chubby and I ran indoors in fright.

We stood behind the half open door at number fifty, watch-

ing the water cascading off the copings and steps forming rivulets running across the pavements and washing away the hopscotch lines that had been chalked there weeks ago. One or two kids lingered outside determined to brave the downpour and get thoroughly wet.

Another flash of lightning and an instantaneous, deafening crash of thunder, which sounded as if the sky was cracking and falling, put paid to their bravado and sent them scurrying for home. And drove us down the hallway to the safety of Auntie Mary's kitchen.

A Double Rainbow

Auntie Mary was sitting at the table with her cigarette and a cup of tea. Her children were gathered by the window, staring into the rain outside, waiting for the next flash of lightning or thunderbolt from the heavens. She got up, gave us a towel to dry ourselves off, produced a tin of biscuits and gave us one each. She looked out of the window and glanced up at the sky as if expecting some hidden sign. More lightning, and shortly afterwards, more scary thunder.

"The storm's moving away now," she said positively but with a knowing hint of mystery.

"How can you tell?" I asked, fascinated by her certainty. There had been no let-up in the storm. The rain was still noisily hammering down. But the only reply I got, or would get, was another knowing wink and the hint of a smile. Before I could continue with my questions, Bobby Stephens, who lived in the basement flat, was shouting from the door,

“There’s a rainbow! — A *double* rainbow!” The rain was easing as we reached the front door. And there in the sky was the double rainbow, full semi-circles of pure, vibrant colour.

The Devil’s Rainbow

Auntie Mary, who had followed the mad dash from the kitchen, found solemn but story-like words to fit the occasion,

“The rainbow is a sign of God’s promise to Noah that he will not flood the earth again.” 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 as much by Auntie Mary’s commentary as by the sheer splendour of the spectacle. Sure enough the second rainbow *was* faint and the colours *were* in the reverse order. She waited to make sure we had checked it out.

"Everyone sees the rainbow differently," Auntie Mary continues, "they each see their very own rainbow. In Ireland, we could look across the fields when we were out, and see where our rainbow landed. Sometimes we would run there to get the crock of gold left hanging at the rainbow’s end by the leprechauns. It looks like the end of my rainbow will be by St. Vincents. If you get up there quickly before it disappears, you can bring me back that crock of gold," She smiled, and returned to her kitchen.

Before we could decide whether the run up to St Vincents would be worth the candle, Uncle Jim arrived home on his motor bike with its shiny black sidecar. He stood shaking 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. He stood on one leg, wobbling as he pulled a boot off, and catching my eye 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 a good time to press for a clearer explanation.

Later on that evening, when he was working on his wireless in the bedroom, I asked him to explain in more detail. He told me,

“Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. Sound only travels at about 750 miles per hour in air, very slowly in comparison. So, when you get the sort of electrical explosion that occurs 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. So if the storm is on top of you, the lightning and the thunder will be close together. If the storm is say two miles away the thunder follows the lightning about ten seconds later.”

“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. If you do that a couple of times you'll have a good idea of what the storm is doing."

Auntie Mary's Secret

Now I understood. In the know, I was tempted to ask him if that explained Auntie Mary's knowing wink and smile. But I reckoned that was a question too far. He had been more than usually expansive and I decided instead to ask, "But what makes a rainbow appear?"

"When it's raining and the rays of the sun strike a raindrop, the raindrop acts like a mirror to reflect the sun's rays back to you. But it does more than a mirror. It also acts like a prism, splitting the light as it enters the raindrop into separate colours."

He drew a diagram with the sun's rays hitting 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, is then reflected at the back of the raindrop, and comes back out again separated from the other colours. If you put all the colours of the rainbow together they make white light again. Yes?"

"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 at the bottom. Light and colours are reflected in all directions, but the strongest concentration of the rainbow colours 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.”

[diagram]

“But what about the Devil’s rainbow?” I asked daringly, wickedly even. He smiled. This was getting interesting, very interesting.

“I don’t know about the ‘Devil’s’ rainbow, but I can tell you about the secondary rainbow, if that’s what you mean? I nodded enthusiastically to hear more. Uncle Jim had performed a neat sidestep; the Devil was not going to be in the detail.

“A small proportion of the light rays hit the raindrop at a more tangential angle and are reflected twice 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.

[diagram]

I did understand most of it with the diagrams, and I was determined to understand, one day, the mathematics 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; sometimes in very few words. Auntie Mary, showed very little inclination to explain anything matter-of-factly. She would volunteer a story, shrouded in mystery, magic, romance and pure fantasy. It was hard to know what was what. I just couldn't tell with Auntie Mary if she ever told anything tongue-in-cheek. When pressed for a technical explanation, she would say, "Ask your Uncle Jim."

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

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

Auntie Mary and Uncle Jim

Sat at the same table

Uncle Jim chewed the facts

Auntie Mary dined on fable

