

Some Lessons in Gaelic

Excerpts

I honestly could not think of anything I had missed. I wasn't particularly good at anything other than the things I'd mentioned and I didn't want to boast. 'Oh, art, Brother, I'm a good drawer, good at art-work, drawing, painting. At school there was a class prize for art and I won it every year. Don't know if my father mentioned it but no one ever taught me how to read or write or draw, I could just do it, somehow I could just do it naturally. My sister Sam, she's the same, no one taught her either, well maybe I did, just a bit when she was little but —'

'It's called genius,' the Head cut in laconically, 'must run in the family. Now do you have any questions yourself?'

I didn't. My induction had gone very well and to question him might spoil it. 'No, Brother.'

'Well, now, I think we know each other well enough. You're a young boy in a foreign land but I think you'll fit in ok. Brother Brady will take you now into class 2 where you'll get to know the lads in there and a rare bunch they are, too.' He laughed. 'Here at St Luke's you will be given opportunity plenty to do the things you're good at, opportunity for learning and improving and a good strapping, a real good leathering, if you decide not to avail yourself.'

I had risen in my chair, ready to leave, but sat down again as the brother laughed loudly at his own joke. Laughing, I joined him. 'Well, Brother, *Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.*' I had caught him so offguard. The poor man was stumped, just as I knew he would be.

He took off his spectacles and examined them thoroughly as if suspecting a hidden flaw. Behind me Brother Brady stirred and I didn't know if I was to leave or not. From his pocket, the Head took out a white handkerchief and, frowning, began to furiously polish the glass of the spectacles. They appeared so delicate amid the fast-moving sausage fingers that I feared they would snap. I sensed the man behind me moving closer and leaning over me and for the first time, I heard him speak. His voice was strange, very high-pitched and squeaky for such a huge man.

He said, 'Dear God, Brother, he tinks he's Otello.'

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The sacrament of Confession had not changed, neither had the doctrine of the church. It was I who had changed; I was a shameful sinner now. Across the bay, the windows of Calgary propped up the twinkling lights of town, yellow freckles, reflecting in the still, black sea of the harbour. My mother would be preparing my sisters for bed. Her son was supposed to be visiting a friend but, deeply troubled he was at the dock wall, miserable and despairing. I felt that I could hear the chatter and the laughter of my sisters and I envied their innocence. How it contrasted with innocence, now lost.

Confessions tomorrow morning and I was defiled by sin. Confession is a heavenly sacrament, unless you are an eleven-year-old boy, defiled by sin and I stared again over the wall into the inky depths of the dock basin, wondering how much seawater it would take. One month ago this night I had taken a jar of seawater to the back of Calgary but threw it away, sticking my fingers down my throat instead, but it didn't work; there are only so many Wednesday nights that the symptoms of sickness or influenza can be simulated, so I would try again tonight. Anything to avoid school

confession of the morning, just the right amount, briny with the added taste of oil slick, carried home to drink quickly, then to throw up noisily and repeatedly within earshot of my parents. 'No school for that boy tomorrow,' I longed to hear my father say.

Taking the jar from my pocket, I moved towards the steps and felt my way down into the dock, compacted sand beneath my feet, I made my way slowly towards the sound of lapping water, only stopping when it seeped over the welts of my shoes. I stepped back a pace. The walls of the dock loomed above me, to frame an orb of charcoal sky. A tiny wave spilled inland, suddenly to soak my feet and I leaped backwards and dropped the jar. What I was doing was a crazy thing. There must be a simpler, more convincing way to make myself sick than this stupid notion and I began to feel my way back across the sand to where I knew the steps to be.

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As I regained my breath and wiped tears from my cheeks, I told her as soberly as I could, 'In our house we're not allowed to swear.'

Copper lashes fluttered above blue, astonished eyes. 'Who was swearing?'

'Well, you was Poppy.'

She looked aghast at Sam, who had now disengaged her tear-stained face from the rug. 'Who was swearing? Sam?'

'Well, you.'

'What, *me*?' she exclaimed incredulously.

'You were, Poppy.' Sam had started laughing uncontrollably again.

'"Jesus" and "arse" are absolutely forbidden,' I wheezed, 'especially in the same sentence.'

'I didn't say Jesus and arse,' Poppy contested emphatically.

Sam regained some composure. 'We can say bum,' she advised, conciliatory, 'as long as we don't say it too often in the same conversation, but "Jesus", "arse" and "bloody", no way can we say anything like that.'

Poppy's eyes were as big as saucers as it dawned on her that she alone was responsible for our mother's and the younger girls' unscheduled departure. 'When did I say that?' she demanded.

'When you sat down,' Sam said. 'You said that it was "bloody hot" and "Jesus these stones crucify my arse".'

The girl's eyes registered remembrance.

Sam was face down on the rug again. 'Then you said about the bloody stones wedging into the crack of your bum.' Sam could not go on. Her shoulders shook with laughter.

For a moment I saw Poppy's jaw tighten, then a light skimmed across her eyes and she began wriggling again until we could hear clearly the stones grinding beneath her. 'Oh, but they do, Misses, they do,' she called towards the door of Calgary. 'They do.'

My sides were splitting. 'Do what, Poppy?' I prompted.

'Wedge into the crack of your bum,' the girl called out loudly.

'Do what, Poppy?' choked Sam.

'Crucify your arse.' And Sam and I had vaulted off the rug and were sitting beside her in a synchronised buttock-crunching extravaganza among the stones, hysterical with laughter.

'Jesus, one's just got stuck,' howled Poppy.

'Where?' Sam gasped.

'You know where,' wept Poppy.

'Not the crack of your bum,' I hooted. 'Well mine too,' as through misty eyes I saw my mother, arms folded, grimly listening at the gate.

It was at that moment that Jennifer Boyle became my soul mate, my personal introduction to that alien species, girls, not sisters, girls, and as I immersed myself in friendship with Poppy and dreams of Cora, the two girls so intrinsically different in nature had one thing eminently in common; without knowing, they had evoked in my helpless heart that most ardent of emotions, love.