



THE DEAD FRIENDS

DAVE LORDAN

For the audiobook of The Dead Friends,
email dlordan@hotmail.com

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The party happened in a second floor bedsit in Dunmanway, West Cork, above a chipper on Castle Street, on a Friday night in October 1993, getting on for halloween but not quite. This was four years since the Berlin Wall & the concurrent outbreak of hope all over Europe that led to a record vote for the parliamentary left in Ireland, 30 seats for Dick Spring's Labour - the red tide they called it in the MSM, believe it or not, it was four years after the Stone Roses eponymously titled first album had saved the pride of rock and roll & caused fifty billion orgasms across the world, four years since the 'second summer of love' brought on by house music, ecstasy pills & a generation of new age rave rebels had revolutionising youth culture from below & for the better. People my age - we still think of those few years of creative revolt as the Arcadia of our early lives. When we meet we can spend hours talking over each other about the 140 bpm music, the dayglo fashion, the three-day dancing jags, the overall exuberance we felt when sneaking out our windows in the middle of the night to meet our fellow-fugitive friends and cadge a lift to the illegal rave on Sherkin Island or the all-night-out-of-ye-tree-in-bits-in-the-morning xperience of Sir Henry's in

Cork or The Asylum in Dublin - one club that definitely lived up to its name. Dancing in field or barn or warehouse or roofless big house alongside hundreds maybe thousands positively out of the gee like you, to be honest it felt like the young & untethered had taken over the world, & sure maybe we had, a little bit.

Yet when you switched on the TV - although to be fair none of us cared much for TV - it was Archbishop Child-fuck, Jim'll Fake It, & Charlie Haughey's wardrobe all the way - the old world was shook but was very very far indeed from yet releasing its boney grip upon the youth.

It was barely a year since the decriminalisation of both suicide & homosexuality in Ireland. In January 1992 you could have been arrested & charged, three weeks after you had killed yourself, for French kissing a member of the same outward sex. It was like our own day so, like all time periods to some degree I guess, an era of absurd & troubling contradictions out there in the public world, of difficult distinctions between real & fake, lie & tKate in the so called main evening news, of shocks to the system & of the

system double-shocking back. Walls were falling in Berlin, but bombs were falling in Baghdad. And both things, apparently, were happening for freedom's sake. It was a maze of time in which it was easy to get lost & never again be found if you ever tried or were ever forced to travel through it alone as so many were. We had a country full of battered wives, abused children, tens of thousands of lonely depressives crying to themselves, themselves alone, as unwell as they were untreated. It was a crazy time like any other crazy time, when you needed friends to confide in, friends to get by & get through & get out with - it was then a lucky time, a lucky time for me.

Five to one, baby
One in five
No one here gets out alive, now
You get yours, baby
I'll get mine
Gonna make it, baby
If we try

There were five us at the gathering in the little gaff above the chipper, the bedsit. The host & tenant's name was Timmy. The others were Ritchie, The Orange, Dan Mc-

Carthy & myself. We were all aged between 18 & 21. I was 18. We'd known each other all our lives & started hanging out in our teens, part of a larger group of non-conforming young people who made up the alternative youth culture of the town & townlands. It wasn't like in Cork or Dublin where there was one tribe each for ravers, punks, cure-heads, crusties, ska-heads..... & they all had separate hangouts. In a small town all the subcultures hung-out together, protected each other. We weren't rivals, but allies against what we called 'the straights' - a term which didn't have any sexual orientation overtones for us, but referred to all those who lived rigidly, in a straight line, without any craic or spontaneity or independence of spirit & mind. Out of those there that night, Ritchie & The Orange were ravers, Dan McCarthy & Timmy were...well i suppose you'd call them late mods, I was a Curehead - more about that later on.

I am the only one of the five left alive now, twenty five years later, in 2018. There is no good reason why this might be so - why I should be the one-in-five who got out alive. All my friend's deaths were of the kind that could

just as easily happened to me. Just luck separates me in the living from my four friends in the land of the dead. Luck in the form of that hand that reaches through the thorns and fog to pull you safely through just at the point when you had thought that no more help was ever going to come.

Except for Timmy the mod, who was from Drimoleague & worked in a scrapyard near Dunmanway, we were all from Clonakilty, a larger small town, if you know what I mean, about twelve miles away & connected to Dunmanway by minor, winding roads, desolate, damp & overhung roads with many's a ghost of a young drunkard's death-smash or a roaring rebel ambush lying-in-wait upon them.

We didn't have our own transport. Not even a bicycle between us. In fact, The Orange's family, who were shopkeepers, were the only family among us in possession of a car, & The Orange couldn't drive, & wouldn't have been lent it by his faader anyway.

We had either hitched the way to Dunmanway - many people still hitched around back then - or chipped in for a taxi. I don't remember which. Going through ambush country from Clon to Dunmanway would have felt to us all like we were leaving one world, where things were done a certain, old-established daylight way, for another, tipsier place where you played by the upside down rules of the night. Having moved out from Clonakilty while it was still fresh bright airy whirl-a-wind Atlantic October, we likely arrived to inky twilight, or to a just-about-darkness, with good country drizzle shining in the headlight-That starting-up hour of greetings & good cheer around the village as the early hawks of the pub scene, & there were plenty of those, were making their way to counters in McCarthy's & Mother Kelly's & The Cobbler's Stool & so on to order the first...perhaps the second... round of the almighty, though all-too-ordinary, bender to come.

From Timmy's bedsit window we could see the statue of Local old-IRA hero Sam Maguire, after whom The All-Ireland football championship is named. It was he who recruited locally-reared Michael Collin's to the independence movement, & he was

Collin's right-hand man for a time during the war with England. Collin's was shot the first time he set foot in West Cork during the revolutionary period, & Maguire died of TB in 1927, penniless & abandoned. Unlike Collins, Maguire died an enemy of the new 'free' state he had helped created, due to his opposition to the terms of the treaty of Britain, of which Collin's was a chief negotiator. Contradictions abound. Confusion is part of the atmosphere here.

Dunmanway, like much of the rest of west cork, was a hub of resistance to British imperialism during the war of independence. Half of Britain's 40000 strong armed force in Ireland at that time were active in West Cork, where they faced a Guerilla force of about 600, but which was supported by the overwhelming majority of locals. The 600 roundly defeated the 20000, through constant guerrilla warfare & victory in two famous ambush battles, two minor Thermopylaes at Kilmichael & Crossbarry - the two biggest military victories ever won by an Army calling itself Irish. Unfortunately, the rest of Ireland didn't fare so well, & Britain won that war.

Or won a bit & lost a bit – it's a war in which both sides wonlost, or one side lostwon & the other wonlost. Either way, it didn't led to much change, other than in a superficial sense, a nothing-change, like Brendan Behan put it when he said 'nothing changed in 1923 but the badge on the prison warders caps'. The tKate & the lie are so very hard to tell apart, here where the lie smiles out through the face of the tKate.

In Ireland, Cork people have a reputation for excessive pride, braggadoccio, exuberant self-confidence, highjinks and spontaneous partying at all hours of the day and night. Maybe we are like that because we won the war of independence that the rest of the country lost & imposed that loss upon us who had won. Or maybe it is because we are too daft & primitive & out-of-our-trees to know the difference between victory & defeat....We wonlost! Resulting in grand arrogance, alongside mass poverty, alcoholism, self-harm, domestic violence, depression & suicide, utter subjugation to the priest & the booze & boss

& the gombeen's fist & emigrations to the ten scattering winds and the ugliest jobs on the earth

But none of this was on our minds, not in the least, that Friday night in October 1993, as we sat in the bedsit, smoking nicotine & diesel dope, talking over each other about excitedly and boisterously and above all boastfully about last summer's raves & how many magic mushrooms was the right amount to take & the fine things each of fancied & which we hoped to get the shift off later on in Gatsby's niteclub - one of the centres of West Cork Nitelife, as well its underworld, such as these things were at that time, in that place.

Despite the glamorous literary moniker, there were never any gilded heiresses or stock market millionaires, or anything alike, in attendance at Gatsby's. Although the crowd that did turn up were and are, to me at least, quite as interesting & debauched as those in Fitzgerald's novel. These were locals & blow-ins - of which we were never short in sea-close West Cork - of all shapes & sizes. Sheep farmers & factory hands, travellers & new age travellers,

cheesemakers of Dutch origin & international hash couriers from Wallonia, people whose families had been rooted around here for a thousand years & who had somehow survived the long catalogue of catastrophes that had wiped out so many others...those right there swaying alongside the newly landed for or the just passing through on the tear. On Friday nights back then long ago, all of these converged on Gatsby's from all across the Empire of Dunmanway & its near abroad, dripping villages & rugged townlands with poetic names as sonorous as they are meaningless in the english language or any language - Reenascreena, Inchigeela, Manch, & Ballygurteen.

Five to one, baby
One in five
No one here gets out alive, now
You get yours, baby
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According to one internet wit Gatsby's is 'the only late venue in which I have seen wellingtons worn,' which only

tells us this wit doesn't get out much in West Cork, where you are certain to see wellies on the dancefloor now & then. But it will give you a fair idea of the cut of the place all the same. Gatsby's is not an upmarket joint, there wasn't any such thing as a dresscode, or minimum standards of behaviour. You might see a lot more than a pair of wellies out dancing in Gatsby's, or anywhere popular for drink-dancing in West Cork. You might see a cow or a ram or that other thing with horns on it, the devil himself - but that's for later on in the story

We youngfellas were attracted to Gatsby's for a few reasons. The plain, obvious & universal reason that it wasn't our town but somewhere different where we were less known & so less subject to community supervision & gossip-mongering. We felt freer to be ourselves & behave as we wished.

How we wished to be behave was to get extremely high & drunk on legally imported cider, smuggled maghrebian hashish, & magic mushrooms we'd picked in two or three fields in Clasharaggy. Extreme &

poly-intoxication of one sort or another was a universal attribute of the patrons of Gatsby's, whether they were male or female, native or blow-in, 15 or 90 years of age, whatever their sept, townland, occupation, or starting condition. Not that we could feel very much by the end of a night at Gatsby's, but it wouldn't be feeling out of place we'd be anyway, no matter how scattered.

A final reason, & secretly perhaps least in importance to us, was the possibility of picking up a shift. Gatsby's was known as meat market, which pronounced with the local, Spenserian broad e comes out aptly as *mate-market*. It was a place where people who had never so much as greeted each other before, who had been walking past each other unnoticingly for years, & would so do in future for many more years, heavy petted in open view on the dance floor or against the corridor wall or under the table or wherever was handy.

Mate-market is a sexist & sleazy & even disturbing concept when you dig down into it - the woman as the meat, the man as the butcher. The man fin-

ishes one plate of mate, abandons the leftovers, & moves on to the next course. It's still in use today. I hear it said about sleazy nite clubs in Dublin like Copper Face Jacks.

The tKate is that none of us back then was very successful with women, in Gatsby's or anywhere else. None of us had a girlfriend. None of us had ever really had a girlfriend. It might be the case that one or two of us secretly didn't want a girlfriend, but a boyfriend, or bit of both, but they are all gone now & it's too late to find out.

This Friday night , however, I was on a promise, & I was very excited about it.

Her name was Kate. She lived in Leap. She was rather posh. She had at least one horse. Horses are peculiar enough in that you find them at both ends of the social scale, kept by the highest & lowest orders of households. I had some friends in Clonakilty & around it who had horses, mainly Travellers but not always, who even in 1993 bought & sold horses like my own grandfather had, people to whom horses were a way of life or a means of mak-

ing a living. But`kathad a horse in the way that the gentry have horses - she rode it for pleasure & her father paid someone else to do the looking after it. She had a posh accent too, the kind of accent that would immediately draw snorts & mockery from Ritchie & The Orange & the rest - & from me too if it had one of them she was dating. So I wasn't in a hurry to introduce Kate to my less than posh friends. I planned to abandon them as soon as we got to Gatsby's & me & Kate had hooked up.

Kate was a Curehead, as I was. That is we both worshipped & tried to look like Robert Smith, the very beautiful lead singer of British alternative rock band, The Cure, with his panda eyes & blood-red lips & Medusan hairstyle.

So it wasn't really Kate I fancied, & Kate didn't really fancy me. We both fancied Robert, like maybe 10 million other teenagers of the time, & in lieu of any hope of access to the real thing, we would each accept his local avatar. Kissing each other, we could both imagine we were kissing Robert Smith. Many glamorous non-binary heroes,

avant-garde cosplayers, prophets of gender fluidity appeared like so many wise lady-men from East of the Irish sea during the height of the make-up-4-all 1980s. These Goths & New Romantics between them opened the path to the widespread acceptance of non-cis being today. Robert Smith inspired the most devotion among kids like me who, in all sorts of ways, were not willing to accept fixed pre-destinies assigned to us by powers alien & unknown to us. We wanted to look different & to be different relative to the rigid & oppressive norms of behaviour we were born into - thrown into unawares & unconsulted as the philosopher puts it.

But perhaps I'm projecting, perhaps Kate wasn't as much of a Curehead as I was. In my opinion, Robert Smith is the greatest artist that has ever lived. In my opinion the glorious existence of Robert Smith is enough Ying on its own to balance out the Yang of all the world's evils, past, present, & to come. Maybe Kate didn't think quite like that - maybe she just liked the look. Whatever about her though, I think you can see how to my mind, being with Kate was more than merely a sensual prospect, but a spiritual one as

well. I looked forward to the liquid ecstasy of commingling with another True Believer - in a part of the world where there were very few true believers to be found.

You know there was no internet or smartphones back then. You arranged your next rendezvous with your special friend as you were saying goodbye at the end of the current hook-up. Or you sent them a letter, which would have been slightly ridiculous between Kate & I, considering we lived about eight miles apart. It would also have been risky at her end, as her posh parents might have opened it & been, to put it mildly, disappointed at the plebeian nature of her intended consort. I couldn't landline her either, again in case her mother or father answered. So the arrangement had been hurriedly made a couple of weeks earlier, outside the industrial hall in Clonakilty, at the end of another disco & just as Kate was rushing off to take her seat in the minibus dropping all the Leap crew home. We kissed quickly as she was turning to leave - it was our first kiss, & though it didn't last long, it was real & it was a promise of much more kissing & fondling, once we got the chance.

In between that night & this, I had spent a lot of time fantasising - & also feeling anxious that the promise would not be fulfilled. It was, after all, a hurried & tenuous arrangement, especially given that Kate's class of people were not usually to be found in Gatsby's, or even in Dunmanway. She would undoubtedly have to lie elaborately to her parents to cover-up where she was going. Would she be bothered with all that for a heavily diluted version of Robert Smith? I thought she wouldn't yet dreamed she would. & in a way she did, & in another way she didn't, but I'll tell you all about that later on.

Back to the lads. The party & the lads. I'll tell you first about chill-out Timmy, the host. Timmy the Mod. We called him chill-out Timmy too cos he never got upset about anything or raised his voice. He was short, thin, blonde & cropped on top. Unlike the rest of us he, who dressed up to stand out, chill out Timmy tended to dress in the conventional local clothing, trousers, blazers, pointy black shoes - those mod clothes which were also the local quiet man regalia. Timmy had no piercings, no indian ink

tats. He smoked Player's navy cut cigarettes, like a fair few old West Cork paddys did, dreaming perhaps of sailing away, of the adventure filled lives they didn't have. Maybe Timmy dreamed of sailing too. He was slight & lithe like a sailor & he could easily have played a sailor extra in a Broadway musical, leaning in the background silently smilingly smoking while dancing troupes go by. I met him maybe a cuppla dozen times over the course of a couple of years. I never met him sober. He could probably say the same about me, if he were alive. Most of our crowd were loud, rambunctious drunks. Timmy was withdrawn into his own consistent, unsociable silence. He drank, smoked, chewed the shrooms or whatever was going on all in a very quiet way. If we arranged in a circle around a campfire, he would sit at an angle, slightly outside. If we sat swinging our legs in a row on a wall, he would be at the edge of it, with a slightly bigger gap between him & the next lad than between any of the rest of us. Other than this penchant for distancing himself a little, for comporting himself in a slightly guarded way, I can only say that he had the personality of a shadow or a silhouette.

But surely he meant more than that to somebody? To his mother or father, or siblings, or friends, or relations of any sort? I don't know. None were ever mentioned. Twenty years later, long after he has passed away, I find no mention of him or evidence of a family or close friends on the internet.

Did he so spring forth fully formed from the local earth, a miracle child of the native land, like the Autochthons of ancient greek mythology? Swallowed again by a bog-hole at the end of his brief days never to be heard of or thought of again?

As it happens, I am the only one of the five friends of October 93 who exists on the Internet. There are no photographs or even mentions of the other four online, as far as I can discern. Except for one coroner's report, reported in a national newspaper, which i'll talk about later, & which refers to the friend concerned by the 'real name' none of the rest of us had ever heard of.

I doubt if we would have bothered with Chill-out Timmy except for the services he rendered us, vital services such as provision of a base camp in Dunmanway, & a reliable supply of hash. He was the perfect minor dealer. All business, no chat. You handed him your tenner & you got your ten spot fair & square & that was that. He didn't rip you off, & you felt sure that if he happened to be pulled in over it by the shickaloney there was no way he would rat.

All I can recall about Timmy the night of the party in his gaff in Dunmanway is him sitting in the corner with a fag burning away in his mouth & a flagon on the dresser beside him, neither smiling nor frowning, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with what any of the rest of us were saying or doing. Poor, quiet, humble, helpful, peaceful, awkward Timmy - where are you now? If only I knew, I might go there to see you & ask what were you thinking all of the time you sat here in this world saying nothing - or were you thinking anything at all?

There's a thin line between what is & what isn't, what we see & what we don't see, what makes itself known to us &

what remains in the vast beyond our ken. People have always known this, always wondered about the limits of our perceptions, & people have always tried to break those limits. You can break the limits of the real straightaway there now by closing your eyes & imagining yourself flying into the sun, & not getting scorched in the least, right through the corona with its 2 millions of centigrade degrees, touching down on the surface of flowing fire, to umpire a game of chess between the Virgin Mary & an eloquent toad. Or anything impossible, nonsensical you like - the imagination is limitless & lawless: it refuses nothing we wish it to conjure. But what if you open your eyes & you still see impossible, nonsensical things?

Chill out Timmy died in the late autumn of the year 2000. He threw himself off the ramparts of the long uninhabited ruins of Castledonovan, seat of the powerful local Donovan Clan, until sacked by Cromwell in the 1640s. Jagged, mossy rocks broke his fall, & also his neck. Though he left no note, it was a loud death, a death that uncharacteristically screamed, bespeaking perhaps some deep hurt or anger that could not pass through living lips.

Perhaps the unannounced jump from the ramparts fulfilled an overwhelming desire to revenge upon one or more of the living who had hurt him beyond the capacity to live. But what do I know? I know only that if I was writing a work of fiction, I'd have Timmy possessed & led to his death-jump by the ghost of Edmund Spencer, west cork poet & demonic cheerleader for genocide against us locals. Was it Spenser heaved the curse of suicide upon us?

Maybe chill-out Timmy thought when he leaped into the bottomless pit that he was flying into the sun, or jumping through a looking glass, or entering paradise. He didn't say, & we can only guess. I do know where he is buried, & that few mourn him. Or those who mourn him are too broke, or angry, or ashamed, to pay for a headstone, or for much in the way of funerary ornamentation. His grave is marked by a wooden cross, & there is a snow globe containing a scene of the nativity tottered over on the long & narrow dirt mound that covers over his remains. I think the snow globe could have been donated by someone

mourning someone else, who didn't know Timmy, but felt shamed at the way he lay abandoned by all humanity in his death. Or it blew here from another grave during a storm. I picked it up one time & shook it & it snowed inside this globe with three wise men & an infant messiah & a couple of donkeys & the Virgin Mary & though it was twenty three degrees centigrade by the thermometer & the sky was Marian blue in every direction, I felt a cold wind blowing right through me. I felt it in my very bones.

Part 2

There were fairies in Ireland then, & I grew up there, thinking that fairy life was something that was inseparable from Irish life. Fairy stories would be told that were to me & to those around me as much realities of Irish life as are the stories that I now read in books called "Realities of Irish Life."

O Donovan Rossa, Recollections 1838-1898

Hallucinations, visitations, visions & paranormal manifestations have always been a feature of life in West Cork, & my day was no different. In particular, The Virgin Mary

makes regular appearances in & around Clonakilty, as she does throughout West Cork. She is surely the leading lady in the local cast of non-material entities. I have heard very few claims of people hearing the banshee, or of them having encounters with witches, but you run into plenty in West Cork who have had some contact with the VM or one of her miracles. My Uncle, a solid man not given to religious fears or phantasms, once told me he didn't believe in God or the Bible or any of that stuff, but that he was a firm acolyte of the Virgin Mary.

According to records, The Mother of God first appeared near Clonakilty upon the headland now named for her half a millennium ago. Upon the Atlantic facing coast of Inchadoney Island, this craggy, dangerous Virgin Mary's headland divides a quiet, meditative, eastern strand from the busy western beach these days beloved of surfers. Some time in the 1500s a crew of Portuguese sailors, driven dangerously coastwards by an unexpected storm, saw her there praying on the headland. Perhaps not realising her divinely chaste status, & stunned after many weeks at sea by such female beauty, they jeered

& cheered her loudly & vulgarly, like a bunch of private school boys on a rugby bus. Urgently towards the headland they steered the marauders on the ould galleon, looking to dock & land, with gang-rape no doubt intended. But the VM appealed to The Man Above & he sent a swift & vengeful tempest down upon them, dashing the old rig to bits against the viciously jutting rocks & smashing to death any among them who were not drowned first.

No ship has even attempted anchor near that headland since. The tale-song about the incident was still being sung by the older inhabitants of Inchadony island in the late 1930s:

And the vessel from a mountain wave came down with thundering shock;

And her timbers flew like scattered spray on Inchadoney's rock.

Then loud from all that guilty crew one shriek rose wild and high;

But the angry surge swept over them, and hushed their gurgling cry;

And with a hoarse exulting tone the tempest passed away,

And down, still chafing from their strife th' indignant waters lay.

Another way of looking at the story is that the crew were lured & murdered by a sadistic deity employing what is called a honey-trap - the same kind of sex-lure that has been in the arsenal of vicious gods since at least as far back as *The Odyssey*. In any case, surely conning & mass-murdering a ship's crew is more satanic than divine an action. But putting the gloss of divine sanction on evil acts is nothing out of the ordinary in rural Ireland, to speak only of the little part of the world I know from the inside out.

It turns out, as a matter of fact, that a ship called *The Virgin Mary* is the earliest recorded wreck in Clonakilty Bay, going down around the year 1500 - making you wonder what actually lies at the root of this legend. Could it be that the ship was lured to its ruin by some devious method? Probably not, but it's certain that the wreck would have been scavenged if, as the legend indicates, it sank close to shore in shallow waters. 'Wrecking' as this practice was known the world over, was an important source of economic sustenance to marginal coastal communities right up until the 19th century. This is a kind of grave or corpse robbery, a grievous sin in Christian theol-

ogy, a factor which wouldn't have been lost on the wreckers & those they provided for. Perhaps, in order to throw us all off such a rotten scent, they made up a story to make themselves look like the good guys, sanctified their unholy actions - or, to paraphrase Bob Dylan, *philosophised their disgrace*. More & more it seems that hallucinations & visions & the legends they spawn cover-up as much, or far more, than they reveal.

Another, kinder, local miracle associated with the VM are the Virgin Mary shells also found to this day on Incjadoney Beach.

“About the rocks encircling "The Virgin Mary's Bank" are found "Holy Mary" shells. On one side of the shell one can easily discern the letter M, & the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, & on the other side is the image of "The Sacred Heart”.

Two people of my acquaintance had relations with Virgin Mary, but the world might mock them for it, so I wont tell you who they were or what went on between them & the Mother of God. Besides, I too saw things & heard things & felt things now & then myself that did not belong to the real world, but the Virgin Mary was not one of them.

Once, in the middle of the night, when I was wide-awake, I was struck across the face by a something invisible. It stung & I was terrified, but nothing else happened.

Later on, when I was in my mid-teens, I had a far more frightening experience. It was in my grandmother's mid terrace house in Tralee. It was an old damp house that made plenty of strange noises in the night. But I was used to those. On this particular evening I have been left to babysit my younger brother while the over 18s were celebrating some occasion down the town. I was resting on the sofa-bed in the living room, while my younger brother, Eddie, was in the downstairs bedroom next door to where my grandmother usually slept. At some point EDDIE arrived into me terrified to say that there were voices whis-

pering at him from inside the wardrobe & that he could see strange faces crowding against the windowpane from outside. I went into the room with him to try & reassure him, & while I didn't hear any voices or see any strange faces I do remember feeling unusually cold and eerie. It was a calm night outside, which made it all the more shocking when an enormous bang struck the front door, as if somebody had rammed it with a barrel of porter or a sledgehammer. At this point we were absolutely terrified & we retreated to the sofa bed. Not long after we heard commotion upstairs - commotion such as would be made by several large beings running around the two bedrooms. I don't know what we thought we were doing but hand-in-hand, tremblingly, step-by-terrified step, we climbed those stairs to see what we could see. Perhaps the only thing stronger than terror is curiosity...

All the windows in both rooms had opened. That is all. Some force that was neither human, nor strictly speaking natural, had blown open three windows, & the curtains of all three wafted spookily rearward into the rooms, infused with the orange neon of the street lights outside. I remem-

ber thinking that it wasn't suicided uncles or secretly murdered babies haunting us & trying to drive us insane, but that it was all the work of the street lights, the neon. That the haunting was somehow being carried out not by yesterday's world, but tomorrow's. After all the dead can't harm us any more, but those who have not yet been born... that's another story.

None of the above prepared me in the least for what was going to confront me later on that night in Gatsby's - hold your whist a while & I will tell you all about it.

But first the lads, the dead friends, the ghosts.

Dan McCarthy, if he had looked after himself a bit better, would have been quite the looker. He had tresses like a cinematic pirate, or musketeer - long, black, curly, & a moustache & goatee to suit the musketeer look. You kind of expected him to be carrying a sword, to have a scabbard swinging from his hips with a golden sword handle. He dressed casually. Stonewashed jeans, denim jacket, white runners that were not so white after all. You could call it

effortless style if you were being kind, but in reality it was merely unkempt. I don't think he changed his clothes too much. At least I always remember him in the stonewash jacket & denim jeans & white runners that were not so white. The long curly hair had a greasy sheen to it, & you felt with Dan McCarthy that the effort to make himself hip or presentable was not something he was ever going to expend too much energy or expense on. & who could blame him? What would he get in return for dressing up like a bank clerk?

Dan McCarthy was poor. He had left, or more likely been driven out of, school early & he had no prospects whatsoever. There was something about him which said that he himself had given up hoping for any prospects in life. & he wasn't going to make much of a fuss about it either. He had surrendered to destiny, he was going quietly to a pre-determined doom.

Not all the untermensch who despair serve their sentence as quietly as Dan McCarthy. Abandonment of hope – or realisation that there is no hope – can have different re-

sults in different people, other circumstances. Some go down the path of nihilistic hatred towards all that exists. Others, fewer, are like Dan McCarthy & endowed with a kind of pastoral compassion for all those they meet. For, in these cases, hope has not been abandoned just for themselves, but for everybody else as well. So why not be nice, when we are all doomed, futile, & completely deluded? And so Dan McCarthy was very pleasant company to be around. He smiled a lot softly, sincerely, & his eyes were always soft as well: I think they had tears in them that just couldn't reach his cheek, a trapped tear from a long ago hurt he couldn't let go of.

Even though they couldn't escape him, these tears had a charming power over anyone near to them - a room with Dan McCarthy in it was a calm room.

I see him as one of the soldiers who had come, without enthusiasm, but in the line of duty, & facing their own ungodly doom if they did not obey, to arrest Christ. His face cleaved in two by chiaroscuro, half in utter darkness, half revealed by light, as beautiful & as tragic as the saviour

himself. He must live out the remainder of his life in the full knowledge of the crime which he has committed, of the immortal judgement that has already taken place against him in heaven & all-the-same is yet to come. Cul-de-sac of the soul from which there is no redemptory exit.

I never saw Dan McCarthy being unpleasant, & just like with Chill Out Timmy, I never met him sober either. If only everybody I knew back then had drunk themselves humble & pleasant like he did, an awful lot of trouble would have been avoided. Dan McCarthy belonged like most of our group did & our fathers & mothers before us to what Karl Marx calls, with merciless accuracy, the lumpenproletariat - disorderly, misshapen, filthy, ugly ... like a sack of potatoes.

The term doing the rounds now is the precariat. That class beneath the level of the full-time, securely employed workers. We have work in the good times - but we spend as fast or even faster than we earn, so when the bad times come & we are transformed into the reserve army of the

unemployed we have no work & no money either. This is the hardest class to escape by any improving means - addiction & its faster twin, suicide, are the usual exit routes. Simple inertia, a mask of despair, takes care of the many who do not even try to escape. Because it is so hard to escape, it is common for families & whole districts to remain lumpen - disorganised, unstable, beaten, diseased - generation upon generation with each succeeding generation descending further towards hell or adding new twists and tortures to the hell we inherit.

In 1852, three years after the genocide of 1845-49 had ended, in a town at as low as 50 percent of its pre-calamity population, Clonakilty workhouse held over 500 people who were unable to feed or clothe themselves or afford passage to the USA - 400 who could afford passage had emigrated from Clonakilty parish the previous summer alone. In all likelihood Dan McCarthy, no less than myself, was descended from people who fallen into the workhouse at some stage. Or from people who had lured ships to their doom, or from the crew of such ships who swam ashore & was considered therefore favoured of God & ab-

sorbed into the locality like rain that falls on the cracked earth drawing new life out of it.

And that's how he died some years later, by water. An ambiguous slip into water. A drunken accident, or maybe the drink had been taken to steel him for the act that had been calling out to him for its fulfillment since day one of his conscious existence. We go towards death, all of us, at different paces, dipping our toes in the silky black water of it by way of so many minor, short-lived oblivions, to test & tease ourselves with what will happen to us in death & how well we will like it when it finally smothers us down into dirt & releases us.

Part Three?

The first thing I remember about The Orange is the torture he underwent on a hired bus for an hour or so each way on a return trip to Ballydehob for an under 14s football match. Heading there, & heading back again, many of the rest of the boys ganged up on him cruelly, taunting him with chants & abuse to do with their newly minted nick-

name for him. The adults on the bus made little or no effort to stop this. I didn't participate, but didn't stand up for him either. I was vulnerable to bullying myself from the same crowd & was in terror of them. I was a coward, in other words. But one among many. I search my memory for examples of true courage, true solidarity, in the face of the bullying & sadism that was a feature of my life in every one of its different environments at that time &, sadly, I can come with only one or two, which I'm saving for another story precisely because they were special cases which deserve their own space.

Still, how I would love to be able to say now that I was not a coward but a hero & that I rose against the bullies on the bus in an act of dangerous compassion with The Orange. & got a black eye & front tooth knocked out to remind me & all I met of what a hero I had been. Alas, it didn't happen, not in this universe, & all I can say to The Orange now is – sorry about that.

The Orange kept the new name, even though it had been cast in evil upon him. Inspired by the biscuits with the fa-

mously tangy orange filling, The Orange referred chiefly to his stand-out Ginger hair. It also carried a darker meaning, in these troubled times of sectarian violence further north, as a term of diminution for a *Protestant*. A lot of pent up & inchoate anger, fear, & confusion lay behind the psychology of the group of boys who 'christened' The Orange on that horrible bus. I bet some of them are still angry, fearful, & confused several decades later, several decades after that bus ride to hell has gone out of their minds. And now perhaps they channel their cruelty, that cruelty towards others which help us forget our own damnation, towards someone or something else who doesn't deserve it & didn't ask for it. I wouldn't be surprised if I am the only one who remembers that excruciating mini-bus of 1986, when the vicious rechristening took place.

Bullying is often partly, or even largely, a matter of malintended & reductionist renaming of the victim, shrinking them down to a prominent or stand-out feature so that they become nothing but this feature & its negative associations. I was chubby so I got labelled fat frog, lardon. Of

course, when you look back upon such things from the vantage point of maturity they don't hurt any more and you can see the funny side. But it hurt a lot at the time, and The Orange was crying all the way home on that bus.

Victims of name-calling can reverse the hex by adopting the name & infusing it with new positive meanings through changing the context, through creativity, force of character - as African Americans, for instance, have sometimes reversed the significance of derogatory terms inflicted on them, & made gold out of dirt, so to speak.

And that is exactly what The Orange eventually did. After a few years it seemed he had christened himself The Orange, he was so proud of it. It seemed to suit him, & nobody knew or cared that his real name was the very ordinary 'David'. But first he went away to boarding school - probably because of the bullying. Although, going to an all male boarding school to avoid bullying is something like jumping into a volcano to avoid getting burnt. I don't know what went on in that boarding school, but I did hear

from another inmate that there was pretty severe bullying there too. & that other friend hinted to me that The Orange was actually involved in the bullying in the boarding school. That's no surprise – the bullied often go on to be bullies themselves; it's what they have learned, & if you're one of the bullies you're not one of the bullied. Sometimes, like on a GAA bus or in a boarding school in rural Ireland in 1986, bully or be bullied are the only choices you have got.

The next time I met The Orange was in October 1992 in UCC. He was 18, I was 17. We both had a similarly absurd & naive notion of what university was all about. This, remember, was an interesting period both in Irish history & in youth culture internationally. There was something of an air of hope, even an air of transformation & celebration, of carnival. The tyranny of Stalinism had been exuberantly overthrown and in our own country long overdue liberalisations of laws to do with, for example, homosexuality & mental health were taking place. If you killed yourself in Ireland you could no longer be arrested for it. It was also the height of the very brief & very wonderful era of grass-

roots rave culture. Drugs, sex, & partying were having a field day. No wonder the idea I had of college was a three year party.

In fact, a lot of the generation of 92, The Orange included, had the same idea about college as I had - we were going there to become legends of the indie scene. He had changed in his teens, no less than I had. We were no longer the kind that got bullied. I was cool in an alternative 90s way now & i stood out flagrantly from the crowd, no longer a snivelling little weakling hoping nobody would notice him. At least I thought I was cool. I wore combats, & flower printed shirts, & purple Docs. I sometimes even wore a little bit of make up, black eye shadow badly applied, a smack of bright red lipstick. Hardly a wallflower anyway.

The Orange had grown into his insult utterly. It was now something like his superhero name. He was warrior tall & bulky & strong as a heifer, & with his ginger crown & his sandals & baggies & sleeveless tie-dyes he had the appearance of a character in an Asterix comic. Although the

thick, geeky prescription glasses took from that effect a bit. He had the eyesight of a bat & was helpless without his spectacles.

You couldn't miss him, or even avoid him for long & he whistling & humming & singing & jiving & stamping his way around UCC & up & down Bandon Road & Barrack Street. All the Cork City hipsters & bohemians, the djs & the clubbers & the petty dealers of microdots & E's & sheets of LSD, knew who The Orange of Clonakilty was within a few weeks of his arrival in their scene... His reputation, for want of a better term, being that of a daft culchie punk.

Remarkably, The Orange took against alcohol. It was, he told us all again and again, a shit drug. I knew he was right, but wasn't really prepared to give up alcohol at this point, though I knew I had a problem. Instead he preached the gospel of cannabis, ecstasy, mushrooms. We took a lot of these drugs together. We became close friends due to their intoxicating effects.

And we bonded in our ecstasy, but we also bonded in our grief. We were both terribly disturbed by experiences in our childhood which had some similarities. We were both to a degree alienated from our immediate families, & so we both suffered from the deep insecurity & troubling anxiety of having no back up in life, of being among those for whom there is no net when we fall.

We were living a life, like millions of others, for whom the songs of Pink Floyd were a most appropriate soundtrack. The Orange introduced me to Pink Floyd. How many times we sat in our dilapidated house on Bandon Road in the student district near UCC, & watched The Wall together while getting drunk & stoned & crying together & blacking out, so that in the morning we would either not remember or have the excuse of not remembering the crying & the shared despair.

Mother do you think they'll drop the bomb?

So the party on the outside covered a deeper pain, a deeper grief, a deeper rage, a deeper disgust, which surfaced when we were intoxicated. Which is no surprise.

As time went by The Orange begin to take his role as counter cultural icon more & more seriously. His dancing Marathons became legendary. Herculean feats of all night jiving, fuelled by ecstasy or mushrooms or both. Once he swallowed fifty mushrooms & walked the twelve miles from Clonakilty to Dunmanway. Or so he said. The Orange was also a fantasist, he had a Walter Mitty side to him. His favourite fantasy was that he was a target of the drug squad, who he claimed followed him everywhere he went. He saw them in the bushes! He went so far as to carry little pieces of wood about the same size as ten spots & twenty spots & wrapped up like those in tinfoil & concealed at the very bottom of his well-deep baggy pockets 'to fool the drug squad' should they ever catch up with him. I know it makes no sense & a lot of people tried to point that out to The Orange at the time but it didn't matter to him – he made his own sense.

Sometime in 94 or 95 The Orange dropped out of college & took to the road, becoming a colourful tramp, or bard, who dj'ed & played the guitar in pubs & on sidewalks all over Europe. Perhaps a hundred thousand people heard him cover 'Mother' in these years of wandering minstrelry – perhaps it was a million.

I see him tramping the dusty roads between two mountain villages, guitar slung over one shoulder, worn old carry-all over the other, tie dye trousers, twilight falling over the woody slopes around him, a blood red giant of a moon rising, the warm air humming with insects & teeming with birdsong, & in the distance, though you can hardly hear, the rev of a quickly approaching engine....*

I didn't hear from him, only sometimes heard whispers about him, for years. I read 'On The Road', The Orange lived it. 'i saw the crescent, you saw the whole of the moon'. Then one night about 2003 when I was living in Monkstown, Dublin, I received a phone call from him. He had returned to Ireland & had decided to become involved

in the cannabis legalisation movement. He had heard I was involved in activism and, not unreasonably, thought I might be able to help out. But I wasn't enthusiastic, freeing the weed was low on my list of campaigning priorities. I know it's a just cause, particularly for medical purposes, but The Orange wasn't talking about that, he meant legalisation for recreational purposes, & I didn't & don't see the point in campaigning for something anyone i knew could already have whenever I felt like having it. It feels like campaigning for the release from prison of someone who isn't in prison. So we didn't connect around that, although I made vague promises, & we made vague arrangements - ghost arrangements - to hook up.

The next I heard or tKatefully even thought of The Orange was half a decade later again when it came through a mutual acquaintance that the revving car described on its approach above had caught up with The Orange's wanderings & ended his life in a pool of thick blood & mashed bones & the guitar all broken up, the strings all snapped, the music over on the side of a lonely, alien road.

Part Four

When it comes to the last & greatest of my dead young friends, Ritchie, I really don't know where to begin.

It wouldn't be appropriate to him, to how he was & how he lived, to tell what I know of him in a straightforward way. Instead, I shall try to tell it slant, as the storytellers advise, to tell a zig-zagging, spiraling tale.

Let's start with the ancient spirals I set modern eyes upon in 2016 at Newgrange. Such as are found etched into megalithic monuments in many parts of the globe. As has often been remarked before, these etched spirals resemble spirals hallucinated by countless modern-day imbibers of psychedelic drugs, leading some esoteric writers to claim that those who built monuments such as Newgrange based their entire world view upon such hallucinations, & that they used such drugs not in any sense recreationally

but always for higher, ritual purposes. And I don't think it's stretching credibility too much to say that hallucinations & what you might call out-of-your-mindfulness have played a role in the formation of the religious imagination in particular. You will find numerous examples of devils & Demons hallucinated & quite sincerely so by the peasants of Ireland in the folklore records, & not all of these visionaries were on drugs or whiskey. The counterculture which perhaps finally arrived in Ireland in the early 1990s, believed that hallucinatory substance experiences were profoundly enlightening. On an individual level maybe they were, and are, for some people. I don't however fall for the notion that one enters a kind of alternative, superior universe when tripping. Without passing comment on the eventual condition & sad fate of those who took the idea that taking drugs could free your mind seriously, I would like to point out that people overwhelmingly hallucinate the imaginary beings, or close analogues of the imaginary beings, which they have programmed from early childhood to believe in. In Ireland we hallucinate devils and Virginmarys. Because it's the likes of these that have been etched into our imaginations in a thousand &

one subtle & not so subtle ways since the day we were born. As Jung discovered, the human unconscious - our imaginations vast reservoir of dreams and images - can be deeply conservative, & the visions most people have when they are tripping are more like a kind of psychological vomiting than they are any kind of prophetic insight into the true nature of reality, whatever that might be.

I don't recall Ritchie ever talking pseudo 60s nonsense about drugs & what they can do for you - that was more mine & The Orange's line to be honest with you. Ritchie just enjoyed drugs for the escapist pleasure & the enhancement of mood & physical sensation which they offer. He enjoyed taking drugs, giving away drugs, & selling drugs. & like a lot of people who sell drugs, & some of those to buy them, Ritchie was demonised by respectable society which takes & tolerates legal drugs such as alcohol & Valium & plenty others more dangerous in ways than most illegal drugs.

/the owl covent gardens I remember 'em so well/

Ritchie spent a summer in London in the building sites sometime when he was very young. Maybe he was 16 or 17. It was something nearly every male growing up in our neighbourhood looked forward to doing at some stage. Every single one of us had family living in England, & it was on the building sites the men worked, while the women became cleaners & bartenders & waitresses for the most part, & stayed on working after they had children in many cases, becoming both worker & homemaker. In London Ritchie learned how to be a working class Irishman of the defeated variety. It involved backbreaking work without complaint, inebriation at every opportunity, petty gambling as a daily habit, the acceptance of, if not always the enthusiasm for, the occasional spectacular bar fight, an enjoyment of pranking & an expectation of being regularly pranked, an attitude of unquestioning loyalty to male comrades, to be proven by unquestioning participation in aforementioned bar fights, mutual hostility with the police, a proprietorial & virgin-whore attitude to women with the mother as holy worshipful virgin, the wife or girlfriend as an owned being, & girls in mini-skirts as whores of Babylon. Now, I think you will agree that this is a com-

plicated curriculum & a lot to learn in a mere summer. But, despite being labelled a slow learner in court documents much later, Ritchie was a star pupil & before summer was half way through was himself enthusiastically training new candidates for this stereotyped, predestined, fate himself. Except for one crucial thing - Ritchie was no fighter, no macho man, no brawler. He had no violent instincts, no scrap-desire in him at all. As a rule he was friendly & welcoming to all-comers & he made no judgment over others, he held no long-term grudges, he made friends - good friends - wherever he went & he helped others out whenever it was needed and however he could. In this he no doubt took after his beautiful mother, Annie, whose sparkling eyes & sun-like smile are the eternal welcome of West Cork in my mind's eye & true gems of West Cork for sure.

A large curriculum but one that did not include learning how to look after yourself, how to love yourself, how to listen to the saner voices inside your head & out. Quality of life for graduates of this London summer school for west of Ireland boys was such that life in a post-famine

workhouse might have seemed preferable, if they were given the choice. & life expectancy was not much more than 50, if even that. Violent deaths, workplace accidents, alcohol related accidents & diseases, suicide slow & fast, put paid to many.

While in London Ritchie had tried a range of exciting drugs that were still exotic to Clonakilty teens at that time. Skunk, a pungent & intense type of weed that had holy grail status at the time, LS. This he highly recommended. About & the new entrant to the scene, Ecstasy, he was equally effusive, but E was very costly then, coming in at about 45 euro a pill in today's money. It was good few more years before I tried ecstasy. I learned all about these from Ritchie that time I went dossing with Colm Harrington of Rossmore, smoking a ten spot of diesel hash in Leo's little flat up on McCurtain Hill. Leo was Ritchie's best mate. They took turns rolling each other joints, they combined on cash-scraping exercises to fund special-offer flagons mid-week - pulling together the 3 pound needed

out of cadged 10 penny pieces & the odd pound note lifted from Dad's jacket pocket or Mom's handbag.

There were only two chairs in the flat so Colm & I lay on the floor for the day, spread out & heaped up on our elbows, their apprentices, their shadows beneath helping to roll the joints & to smoke them. The flat was cold & the floorboards were colder. We listened to a Thin Lizzy cassette, a bootleg as they used to be known, some concert in Dublin or London recorded by a fan or bootlegger years before, & which Ritchie had borrowed or robbed from his older brother, also now dead, but then, like Ritchie, like us all, at the height of his exuberant, action-packed youth...We talked about London, drugs, the lads who were sound & the lads who were planks, the girls we fancied & did not fancy, Arsenal & Liverpool & Man UTD, asshole teachers & assholer pigs, the new rave music that had no bands or famous faces or dedicated magazines, that was sprouting all over the UK & was to come to us yet, & about the old bands & songs we still liked.

“The oul Covent Garden, I remember it so well...

The last time I saw Ritchie was in 2006 or 7. I was at home visiting from Dublin, and i was with some family in my Uncle Johnny's house. I went out the back to fill up the coal bucket. We had a breeze-block structure about five feet high that served a coal store. It had a wooden lid on it to keep the coal dry. I lifted the lid & up popped Ritchie, blackfaced from the coal dust & to all appearances as if he had been deep underground blowing dynamite holes all day....

Jeesus Ritchie, what are you to?

There's a bench warrant out for me.

Ah. Will ya be stuck in there long?

Yerra till about 6 o clock, til the shift changes above in the barracks.

Right. Do you wanna cuppa tae or anythin?

No, I'm grand boy thanks.

Any other craic?

Nah same ol' same so ol' ya know yerself. How are things in Dublin.

Ah not too bad. Great to get a break from it. I better head back, they're freezin inside there...

Alright boy talk soon

It was my Uncle who had offered the Ritchie the hideout in the coalsheds. After so many years had passed with me rarely visiting Clon, Ritchie was now much more of my Uncle Johnny's friend than mine. Well, they had a lot in common!

About a year later Ritchie was arrested in Kent Station Cork getting off the 18.15 from Dublin with €15,000 worth of cocaine, or what the cops said was €15,000 worth of cocaine. Ritchie violently resisted arrest – again according to statements made by the police. The fact that I find it necessary to include such qualifications in relation to the word of the police might be found unusual by some of you, although others will understand perfectly. Like a lot of people from working class backgrounds in Ireland I have personal experience of being lied about & mistreated by the police & have absolutely no trust in their bonafides. So maybe Ritchie resisted arrest, & maybe he didn't, &

maybe it was €15,000 worth of cocaine or maybe it was €50 worth of cocaine. In any case he was tried as if he had resisted arrest & as if it had been €15,000 worth of cocaine. & for these crimes, exaggerated or not, he received a minimum 10 year prison sentence. The trial also noted that he absolutely refused cooperation with the police. This could be interpreted as the contemptuous behaviour of a vile drug dealer towards the authorities who are trying to save us all from such terrible people. But his absolute silence could also have meant that he was absolutely terrified of mentioning anything to do with where & who he got the cocaine off, because to do so would be a death sentence, & that death sentence, inflicted by a justice system even more brutal & unfair than that represented by the Gardaí, could be carried out as well inside prison as it could outside. & there is another reason for his silence which is perhaps more romantic & somewhat more historical in origin,: the murderous enmity for rats felt by working class people all across rural Ireland, a blood-tradition borne out of generations of suffering under & struggle against oppressors-in-uniform.

Four months or so into his sentence Ritchie died of an overdose of heroin in his prison cell. Medics were called to the cell after he complained of feeling very unwell but it was too late. I have always found this apparent overdose suspicious. On the one hand Ritchie was very very unhealthy; he had been abusing alcohol & every other drug you care to imagine for 20 years or more, and he ate nothing but fast food, so that his weight had ballooned to morbidly obese levels in latter years. So his heart must've been very weak & an overdose could have been any dose really. On the other hand the fact that Ritchie had been taking so many drugs for so long meant that he had built up an enormous level of tolerance, & he was obviously an expert on dose size as well. In all likelihood there was something dirty & poisonous in the heroin he took. But was this deliberately dirtied heroin? There were some suggestions that Ritchie deliberately overdosed. But suicide doesn't make sense. Ritchie, from what I know of him, just would not have been the type to commit suicide. We'll never know. But I do often find myself wondering about Ritchie, as the great poet Erich Fried once wondered about Ulrike

Meinhof's death in custody in Germany in the 1970s- who was it that committed this suicide? He could have been deliberately poisoned by rival dealers, or by an agent of the big dealer he had gone and lost the 15000 grand on. Only speculation of course, but it's no speculation to say that a prisoner's life, an addict's life in an Irish prison is cheap & as unregarded & as discardable as a used needle.

*

Several times in the Autumn of 1993 I went picking magic mushrooms with Ritchie. They grow in abundance in West Cork, on well watered land, in use or recently used by cattle or sheep. There are good mushie seasons & bad mushie seasons. If the weather is too dry, too warm, too cold, fewer will grow & they become difficult to find. In good seasons, however, the fields brim over with them & aficionados store the surplus in honey, brandy, ice-cream - whatever is handy. A friend of ours, Alan the crustie, a new-age traveller & caravan dweller, had around ten thousand in storage when the guards called round.

Alan claimed to be making soup from them, & somehow that ludicrous claim was accepted & the case was thrown out of court. As was the case against another of our friends, charged with possession. They are legal to have, but not to eat, legal to pick, but not to store, or something more or less absurd like that. We are in arrest you for killing yourself legal territory here - the kind of laws that make no sense except as a means of repression of one sort or another. It's the same soul-sampling reality-hating anti-human logic that comes up with laws against suicide & laws against recreational drug use.

Anyway, 93 was a good season, & we picked thousands in a couple of hours off a boggy slope overlooking the stunning Inchadoney Bay on the Ring Road. A field which the Celtic Tiger turned into a housing estate, as it happens.

And before it was a field, it was no doubt a forested slope. & sometime before that it was molten rock flowing from the burning mantle of the earth. & what it will be in a hundred years' time or a trillion years' time nobody knows. We go from Lava to Forest to Pasture to Real Es-

tate, what is next in that sequence is impossible to access - except perhaps in a psychedelic vision!

You collect the mushrooms in paper bags, because in plastic they will mush & liquefy & rot too quick. Paper keeps them dry & separate. Then at home you lay them out on newspaper & you put them under your bed for a night or two to dry them off. Drying, they turn from off-white to golden brown in colour & become dry enough to be powdered. You can squeeze them between your fingers & turn them to dust. They also shrink as they dry & can get so small & tangled up too after a while, so much so that it can be hard to tell how many you have got, or how many you have taken. It was a mixture of this confusion, & our stoopid drug bravado, that led to us all taking too many - way too many - mushrooms on the night of the party.

How many is too many? Anyone who is of nervous disposition, or suffering from any form of mental fatigue or illness, or is stressed or traumatised for any reason, should

not take even one magic mushroom, or indeed any other non-prescribed drug of any kind.

Anyone who has not already smoked weed or hash on several occasions, & on each occasion found it thoroughly enjoyable, should also refrain. Anyone with blood pressure, heart problems, circulation or digestion issues, epilepsy, diabetes, or indeed any chronic health issue, steer well clear of magic mushrooms. & after all, what are you missing that is all that important? It is perfectly possible to live a fully enlightened life without ever getting out of your tree on anything. Drugs get you out of your head in various ways, most of them pleasant - but circumstances matter - & the more excitable & braggadocious like to think of this as expanding their consciousness. The bare facts however are that drugs destroy brain cells by the trillion every time you take any one of them, & chronic use of any one of them will inevitably lead to mental degeneration.

So if they are not for you, get over it & move on...

And it is not just a case of one's pre-existing mental & physical condition. Immediate circumstances of when, where, & with whom you should trip also crucially matter. Take them with a small group of trusted friends, on a dry night, & go walkabout, outside in nature, ideally by the sea, under a full moon, in a quiet area where you won't be disturbing anyone. You'll need plenty of liquid, water or beer, & toilet paper too cos a lot of people find they need to clear their bowels urgently an hour or so after dosing. & bring a couple of cartons of Orange Juice too, in case somebody isn't having a good time & wants to come down; a couple of slugs from a carton of OJ & they will be right as rain.

Take between 20 or 30 of the dried up kind. Don't chew too much - they're not tasty - & wash down quickly with a mug of tea.

part 6

The night of the party we took a lot more than 30. Maybe 70, maybe 90, maybe a hundred & twenty. The Orange had made a tea out of hundreds & bottled it in three or four luczade bottles that we shared around. So no-one could tell how many exactly they had taken.

At the advised low dose of 30 or so mushrooms, the effects, after the initial coming-up shits & jitters, are overwhelmingly positive in most cases - if all above advice is followed. You will experience sequences of whole body orgasms known as 'rushes'. Your perception of colours, sounds, physical contact will be pleasurably enhanced to a previously unimaginable degree. You may laugh heartily & uncontrollably at times & for a long period. You may feel a deep sense of love & fellowship for your companions & with your natural surroundings. Some find it makes for incredibly sensual sex, although others find sex too weird altogether on mushies. One of my best ever mushie experiences was skinnydipping with my

friends in the sea near Dalkey - anything active & physical in a safe natural environment will be great fun. Hallucinations at this level are mild & entertaining (to the strongminded!) at this moderate dose level. You may see a knot on the bark of a tree turn into a wise old wizard's face, or the full moon into the face of a Goddess, or strange shapes darting about in the corner of your eye. But you are aware at all times that these simple hallucinations are part of the trip, an effect of the drug, & not real or threatening in any sense.

Synaesthetic effects....

It is a different matter however when you take too many. I already knew I was out of depth back in the flat, before we had gone anywhere near Gatsby's. For the first time in my life, I saw music. Thank chance I had done my homework on tripping, because at least I had a name for the otherwise completely unrecognisable, utterly alien thing that was happening to me. I saw the Stereo MCs *Connected* as

dozens of neon red-green strings or worms undulating in waves from the speakers on either side of Timmy's boom-box stereo. Each chord sent out a new wave. Weird spaghetti radiation in all directions.

The other lad's faces contorted demonically every time I looked at one of them. Their mouths sprayed multi-coloured worms in all directions when they laughed.

If you ever see someone standing dead still while staring transfixedly & amazedly at a traffic light, it's because they are tripping. When you are tripping you discover that traffic light can not only be seen, but also heard, smelt, & tasted. The green-go light emitted a low bassy throbbing noise akin to didgeridoo, it smelled like mint, & tasted minty too. It's this pretty obvious connection between what I thought a green-go light smelled & tasted like & deeply rooted pre-existing mental associations - who doesn't know green is mint-twinned? - that helps to convince me there is really nothing mystical or cosmic about hallucinations or indeed pyschedelia in general.

Drugs derange our imaginations, our memories, our thought processes, & our high minds try putting things back together in some kind of order that makes some kind of sense, even an evil sense kind of sense. The things we see outside of us while tripping are projected from within. The ghosts or angels or gods or demons we encounter are exactly those we have culturally inherited. Christians (lapsed or otherwise) see Christian demons. Muslims see Djinns. Followers of animal religions see their totem animals. And so on.

You can enjoy hallucinogens thoroughly - and hallucinations really can be great entertainment - without making a silly religion of it. Take them to get out of your tree in a fun way - & forget all that shite talk about cosmic visions.

Having said all that, (with, of course, the benefit of hindsight), what I experienced in the flat with the stereo & on the street with the traffic lights, as novel & as unsettling as it was, gave me no intimation as to the encounter with hell that awaited me in Gatsby's.

Kate was tall & thin & shapely & had long, thick, straight, shimmering hair coloured somewhere between vixen & otter. She wore standard Curehead make-up - kohl-black eyes, thick, vivid red lipstick. It occurs to me now that these are the symbolic colours of anarchism, of the desire for total freedom. Most people, myself included, who tried to look like Robert Smith - widely considered of the most beautiful human creatures on display in the world at that time - ended up resembling overdone clowns having a stroke. But not Kate - Kate had the face for it.

But before the face I would like to mention the hair again. It could flash fox at you under a strobe light, but in daylight it was chestnut or hazel with sparks in it, like the sun catching glints on Mount Brandon's winter-browned slopes.

Her eyes were a marbled blue, large, oval, self-assured. Together with her height & athletic, horse-riding physique, they gave her a high-ranking air.

Her cheeks were high & long & did not flush - although they were not pale either.

Her mouth was wide & large & pouty.

She was beautiful, interesting, smart, & - I felt sure - passionate. & that passion was, unbelievably - at least temporarily, at least partially, at least for one night, tonight, to be focused on me - if she showed up.

By the time we staggered into Gatsby's the full whack of my psilycybin overdose had struck.

I needn't tell you that the inside of Gatsbys was loudly vibrating, crowded with drunks falling over each other, twilit, dirty, frightening, a maelstrom of chaos & confusion. Out of my head as I was, I remembered & focused desperately upon the evenings prime directive, which was to meet Kate, to locate her in this human mess, to pick her out of this heaving mass of faces & limbs.

I was in luck. The very first young woman I laid my eyes upon was Kate. But hold on a minute, so is the second one, & the third, & the fourth... In short Everywoman in Gatsby's nightclub is Kate, is as tall as Kate, as shapely as Kate, is dressed exactly as one would expect Kate to dress on an occasion like this.

I smile at one Kate, & walk towards her in greeting, & then, out of the strobes, the thumps & vibrations through the floor & radiating at me flame-coloured from the wall, the swirling dry ice, or is it smoke - it is thick & black like smoke - another Kate comes along, & after that another, & another & I don't know what to say, or do - would you?

You are looking for a needle in a haystack, & all at once every length of straw turns into a needle...if a demon was playing tricks on you, isn't this the kind of trick it would play...

And now things take a turn for the worse. Everybody in Gatsby's, all the Kates, & all the men, the men who have all retained individual features, queerly enough, sprout

horns, two fleshy horns each straight up out of their upper foreheads. These are large & terrifying, & covered, as indicated, in flesh - a much more convincing look for human horns than pure bone or ivory.

It's at this point I should confess that i have, especially during two separate, extended periods in my life, been subject to hallucinations without hallucinogens. The first period are my early childhood, from about 4 to 6 years old, when extremely vivid nightmares would continue taking place around me after I had awoken. The second period was late adolescence, from about 16 to 19 years old. During this period I was unable to look in the mirror for longer than a couple of seconds before my face would begin warping & morphing in strange & disturbing ways. Sometimes this would be in a werewolf direction, & the image would sprout rough & thick bristles from forehead to chin & its eyes take on an evil-looking red glow. & other times it would be more like a crazed version of my real face - like Jack Nicholson's face when he goes nuts in *The Shining*. I remember watching *The Shining* on the vidjo machine, perhaps the first such machine in Clon-

akilty, in Mick JCs pub on Macurtain Hill when I was about 5 or 6 years old, an impressionable age for such exposure.

These minor hallucinations would stop as soon as I looked in the mirror. But they were deeply disturbing all the same, & left me with a feeling that I did not fully control by own being, or my perceptions, that I was to some extent possessed.

And possession is the only term that comes close to expressing the situation I faced in Gatsby's. I had absolutely no rational control left over my perceptions, my mind, or my actions.

A voice now spoke to me. It sounded like me, but it was not me, it was the demon in me.

Go to the Dancefloor now & dance. Keep dancing & dancing & do not dare to stop. For if you stop Gatsby's & everyone in it will burn to the ground & the devil will take your soul.

This not just the once but many many times over and over...

Go to the Dancefloor now & dance. Keep dancing & dancing & do not dare to stop. For if you stop Gatsby's & everyone in it will burn to the ground & the devil will take your soul.

I staggered towards the dancefloor. In the long bar-mirror at one end, silky orange flames were lepping 'round all over, seemingly licking the faces of the dancers & curling around their gyrations. On the real dancefloor, it was not so bad. True, the walls around it were on fire, & the people sitting at the tables laid out alongside the walls were waxily melting, horns & all, but the dancefloor itself was as yet free of hellish inferno.

I got to the middle of the dancefloor & started dancing. I do not know what music was actually playing, but the music I heard was very fast, very hard techno, interlaced with fiercely high pitched whistling & ululating & a thumping bass-drum beat that shuddered up through me from heel to crown & seemed to shake the very marrow of

my bones. My heart, going 120bpm, hammered at my rib cage like a caged prisoner less trying to escape than to bring down the whole prison on top of himself & everyone else. My breathing was very rapid, & very shallow. I felt very very hot & sweat was boiling out of glands at riverine rates. I had the external symptoms of a full blown panic attack, of a profoundly traumatic psychotic episode.

But now there was no human presence left on the dance-floor except myself. I could no longer see the fiery mirror, the flaming walls, the warping flesh-horns, the waxy melting lips & eyelids. Instead I was dancing in clear space about five metres in diameter, surrounded by a swirling mist that throbbed intermittently with an orange glow. Out of the mist leapt demons made of fire who lunged at me one-by-one, dancing always just a little bit faster than me, just a little bit harder, so i always had to dance faster myself to keep up. Faster & faster to keep up with the fire demons, for I didn't keep up I would die, my black burnt soul be borne away to hell, & Gatsbys & all within incinerated. A heavy burden all this was!

The mind is its own place, & in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven says old, blind, ranting visionary John Milton in *Paradise Lost*

Faster & faster, higher & higher, hotter & hotter, sweatier & sweatier, my breath getting shallower & shallower, my heart thumping harder & harder, & the devil showing no mercy whatsoever.

I believe that in an only infinitesimally altered universe, I would have now become the first if my gang to die, & if not to die, then go irredeemably & permanently nuts. How much can a body take? & a mind, what does it take to shatter a mind? Surely not much more than the state of extremely mentally & physically demanding condition I was now in.

And, which, I might as well ask you, would you rather? To die straightaway or go nuts-without-reprieve?

Most of the stories of people going crazy due to psychedelics are plainly exaggerated or made up from

scratch. But the effect of an overdose of such on an already vulnerable mind, as my mind was at that time, could indeed be catastrophic.

The combination of high volumes of alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, & psilocybin in my blood stream that night, added to intense organ stress of a prolonged panic attack, could have - indeed perhaps should have - overwhelmed my heart, or my liver, or my kidneys, or all three at once.

But luck intervened, or was it God? Or merely a good spirit? Or simply friendship? Yes, it was friendship; human friendship intervened.

Instead of a demon lunging forth from the swirling mist-barrier, this time it was Ritchie who approached.

Are you alright, man? Trippin out a bit yeh?

My head is fucked man. Demons everywhere...fire...

C'mon outside for a while so & I will help you come down.

Outside in the street we found an empty table, with a full ashtray, & sat down. I was relieved a little, but no less demotivated than I had been inside. I still had a powerful feeling of having been taken over by something alien, demonic, hostile. Flames shot out of Ritchie's eyes & I couldn't look at him without seeing his face shape-shift demonically. I doubted it was really Ritchie. I thought Ritchie was a demon bent on killing me. I thought he had always been a demon, all these people all around me had always been demons, I had always been in hell, all things in this hell despised me, threatened me, wanted to inflict pain & injury & terror on me, wanted to destroy me.

I think I started to cry. Or I found the courage to ask for help. I thought I was never going to be right again.

Ritchie went to the bar & brought me back two glasses of orange juice. I drank them. Even as I was swallowing

them down, I felt the devils leave my body. The flames retreated back into the courtyard walls. Ritchie began to look like Ritchie again. I stopped hallucinating. I came down. Hell is a Vitamin C deficiency, apparently!

Ritchie surely saved at least my dignity that night, but maybe it's an exaggeration to say that Ritchie saved my life, or my mind. I don't know. I think there are a fair few young people who have lost their life & or their mind because they didn't have a friend like Ritchie. Those of you who have no experience with class A drugs will perhaps underestimate the selflessness of Ritchie's seeking me out & helping me survive the night intact. Most people when they are really high don't want to hear about it if even their best friend or their lover is having a bad time. Being high on yokes or psychedelics can be an experience of profound oneness with those around you on the same trip - unless one of them starts wrecking the buzz by panicking, throwing up, etc. Then they can fuck off for themselves!

Class A's are a very selfish, very narcissistic, profoundly individual & separate experience when it comes down to

it. I get high because of how it makes me feel - to Hades with the rest of you!

I have maintained that there's a link between peoples culture & their own personal experience & the hallucinations & delusions they will suffer while under the influence of psychedelic drugs, or suffering a psychotic breakdown. It's pretty easy to make at least a superficial connection between my culture of fire & brimstone Christianity & the fact that fire & brimstone & Demons surrounded me when I got way too high on mushrooms. But there is a deeper connection between my experience in Gatsbys and my personal experience as a child, which also explains why I am very nervous around crowds of people, especially indoor crowds of drunks. There was an epidemic of alcoholism in my community in the 1980s. Where there is an epidemic of alcoholism, there is an epidemic of violence, of unpredictable outbreaks of violence, especially unpredictable outbreaks of male violence against women & children. Many men beat their wives & girlfriends & their children when they were drunk. Many fights broke out between drunken men late at night, & often not so late at

night in the pubs of Clonakilty in the 1980s. As a child I witnessed a tremendous amount of alcoholic violence. Whenever there was a man & alcohol there was a threat of violence. When there was more than one man & alcohol the threat increased. When there was a group of men, even if these men started out the evening as blood brothers, or actual brothers, there would definitely be violence at some point of the evening, either to each other or against another group of drunken men.

The worst I ever saw was at the Christmas dinner for the Baryte miners of Dunmore in 1979, & annual knees-up thrown by for the management of the mine for the workers & their families. I was four years old at the time. My father worked in the mine, which was for Baryte, a hard white rock found in giant seams off the Inchadoney coast, & used as a drilling element by oil companies in the North Sea.

A man started beating his wife in the lounge of the hotel where the party was held. She was on her hands & knees on the carpeted floor. He was pulling her hair extremely

roughly, shouting vile & obscene abuse at her, & kicking her over & over in the guts. The rest of the men made a circle around the beating & watched it. They didn't intervene. They maybe didn't see anything wrong with what was happening. I don't remember how it stopped.

That was the worst but I was often in situations where violence broke out. And I was severely bullied too for several years as a child, by almost the entire rest of my class.

So is it any wonder that my subconscious pictures intoxicated crowds as hostile & death-dealing?

Thank you Ritchie - & The Orange, & Timmy, & Dan McCarthy. Thank you for saving my life - I wish I could have saved yours.

At some point during the writing of this story, it occurred to me to take some strong hallucinogens with the express purpose of attempting to hallucinate the four

lads, or even to hallucinate the entire party all over again, to time travel, to cheat time & rescue these beloved dead.

If psychedelic drugs could do that, then I would really believe in their mystical & superhuman qualities, but they can't, & I don't.

We can't bring back the dead, those lost to us can never be found again, the coin of life cannot be spent twice. When the lights go out, that's it.

Then it occurred to me that literature - storytelling, poetry - is the greatest hallucinogen, the truly existing afterlife, the only practical, operational time travel machine....

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