

“Up the Dumps”

A one man play

By

Tom Flannery

(Lights up on Buddy's. A bar that's been a dozen things and never quite the thing it meant to be. High ceiling from old glory days. Wood paneling from the 70s. A neon Yuengling sign not yet turned on. The place is cleaned for the night. Chairs up on most tables. The bar itself is the only thing still awake. A man in his late 50s sits at the bar. A former columnist. A man who used to shape stories and now can't shape his own. He talks to the room like he's quite aware of its secrets. He seems a bit frenetic. Bouncing from thought to thought. Something is off....)

Look at this place.

When it's filled every bar looks the same. When it's empty....they all look different.

My favorite story about this place is the one about the day somebody stole one of those nuclear fallout signs from some building downtown and taped it to the front door.....and Buddy loved the sign so much he left it there for months.

I mean....if the bombs started to drop this was where I was headed anyway, but I did appreciate the sentiment regardless.

(walks behind the bar....fingering the bottles and the taps)

Rooms listen to you when there's nobody in 'em. They wait on ya to do the things you've been meaning to do all along. I don't know. I've been wrong before.

I've been tossed out of places worse than this, and better too. I do not discriminate.

Or at least I didn't back then. I'm too old for that shit now. I can still see dents in these walls I was responsible for,

(He glances toward the far end of the bar. Something catches his attention. He stops mid-sentence. A beat.)

No, it's nothing. Just... thought I saw—well. Doesn't matter.

(he reaches over and pours himself a drink)

Don't mind if I do.

Anyway....this place is called Buddy's.

Buddy has been dead for 50 years but nobody could be arsed enough to change the sign.

And you know, "Buddy's" is a good dive-bar name. Very succinct and to the point.

Keeps the riff raff out, too. Kids don't like a place only one word long.

It's been here as long as the mines. Different owners changed a few lightbulbs....added a ladies room. They may have even mopped the floor, though I would not bet my life on it

It is what it is. It is a place of no expectations. A place that keeps its own secrets, and yours too.

Jukebox still has the same shit in it. I don't need to look anymore. I can key in the numbers for "Long Cool Woman In a Black Dress" by memory.

This place could host an O'Neil play if he ever got sick of the waterfront. It's a good place to write. A library with bottles for books.

People got married in here. People got divorced in here. The men's room didn't have a door for years because the brothers who lived up the street would constantly get into fights and throw each other through it.

They always minded the ladies room though.

So in a way they were perfect Scranton gentlemen.

I'd sometimes come here to write my own column.

This was all before newspapers got swallowed up by the internet.

Anything more complicated than a Bic pen and a legal pad made me nervous. So me and the internet were never gonna get along.

Buddy's is a pen and paper kind of place. Walking in here with a laptop would be like ordering a fucking Martini.

I mean....I still work for the paper but the newsroom is gone....and the paper is about as thin as a menu most days. It's all over but nobody wants to be the one who smothers it with a pillow.

There's something about a city without a newspaper that nobody around here wants to face. It would sorta validate all the shit talk.

I work from home, and my column is online, behind a paywall, which is something that had to be explained to way too many times

Fucking Breslin would be rolling in his grave

But in its heyday.....

There was glorious amounts of fear every single day. The deadline was always looming. It's the only time I ever enjoyed being afraid. It was like a drug

I didn't look at the clock for decades.

Now? All that's gone.

People have the attention span of a single shit

If what you need to say can't be digested in that time?

Fuck off.

(smiling to himself)

I shared newsroom space with this guy name McClarity....an old WW2 vet with a long fuse....because he put up with the screaming editor for years until one day he snapped and grabbed the guy by the leg and dragged him down the back stairs, making sure his head bounced off every step.

Fucking McClarity. Like everybody else you had to wonder if the place attracted damaged people, or if it did all the damaging itself.

You just never knew what might happen. Guys would go to lunch and come back on Wednesday. If somebody pulled the fire alarm nobody would have heard it. The place was a fucking circus.

I'm supposed to recreate this all by myself from my kitchen table?

I remember once.....it was a slow news day. Editor told me to go out there and get something. So I found a carnival...and inside that there was a pie-eating contest. What the hell. I like pie. Maybe some West Side grandma was baking these things from a recipe passed down from the Army of the Potomac.

You know, that sort of thing. That was my wheelhouse.

I'm standing there with my notebook melting in my hands, watching six grown men inhale blueberry like they're trying to outrun something, and suddenly one of them — big guy, volunteer fireman — just keels over. Face-first into the pie. Boom. Gone. The crowd screams, kids crying, blueberry everywhere. Guy is as dead as Julius Ceasar. We even got art.

I mean....I figure this is the scoop of the century.

I burst in like I got a copy of the Pentagon papers. And the editor doesn't even look up. He just says, "Did he win?"

No way I could write it after that.

(long beat,,,,smiling to himself)

(brightening)

Once they put a computer on my desk it felt like I was being asked to drive to the moon.

You know...I had a long term affair with my Underwood. Even electric typewriters felt like cheating.

I adored the feeling of making these stories with my hands. People still say, "well with a computer you could go so much faster...."

But I don't *want* to go faster.

The best ones I don't EVER want to finish. I want to write them forever.

Before all the internet shit, the city would talk to me, and I'd regurgitate it back to the city.

Small fish in a small pond.

But it beats working for a living.

I could crank out 700 words about a city pothole before taking my jacket off. And the words would SING.

Then I'd track down the guy who fixed the pothole and find out he had a sick kid that needed a wheelchair....and everybody in town would send me quarters and dollars and the kid would get a wheelchair.

It wasn't much but there was enough magic in it to keep me recognized on the street for 40 years.

And that kid would be forever grateful.

I'll admit that I liked that part of it. I liked to create the narrative. I liked to drill down until the story wrote itself. Breslin didn't write about JFK being assassinated. He wrote about the guy who dug JFK's grave.

Any fool can write a headline. It takes a bit more to find all the moments that make them up.

But still, I managed to miss the one thing that mattered.

(He stops. Looks toward the door. A faint sound? A shift in the air? He waits. Nothing. He continues.)

Danny. Christ. Danny. I should talk about him. It's what I'm here for.

My chest feels tight. Didn't feel like this even when this place was filled with smoke.

Fuck me. Gimme a sec.

(he gets off the stool and circulates around the room some, as if he's building himself back up)

I think that's why I liked writing in here so much. Wasn't all that different from the newsroom. Well...I take that back. The newsroom had more booze.

Let me tell you who he was first. Let me describe him in a way that makes you want to stay.

The joke was that he got his mail here....which wasn't a joke at all because he DID get his mail here. Went away to the Jersey shore one week with some waitress and had the post office forward his mail, and then couldn't be arsed to change it back.

He made Tuesday's feel like the weekend.

The world needs people who can do this, even if they are bruised to the bone.

He'd sing along to the jukebox even if he didn't know the words.

On Halloween they'd let the kids come in and Danny would give them all his money, and then he'd grab yours off the bar and give them that too.

One time two sets of girl scouts were having car wash fund raisers across town from each other and he stopped at both of them.

He'd offer you a ride home even if he had to borrow somebody else's car to do it.

One night me and him convinced the entire bar that the Scranton Times was doing a feature on "Local Men of Distinction," and that a photographer was on his way. Half the guys straightened their shirts. One guy ran out to his truck to get a comb. Danny told him, "Don't bother, they're going for rugged," and the poor bastard nodded like he'd just been given a note from wardrobe.

Another time he talked guys into signing up for a Curling league that would be....quote...."held in the parking lots of select Scranton bars"

Said the stones would be “locally sourced.” Said the brooms were “BYOB — Bring Your Own Bristles.” Said the championship would be held behind the Sears at the Viewmont Mall because “the ice conditions are ideal back there.”

Signup sheet ran out of room.

Fucking guy made every night feel like the Olympic Trials.

(quiet....a long beat)

God I miss him

He didn't have a million stories.....he had one story that he told in a million different ways. We used to call his bar tab the national debt. Oh the women loved the twinkle in his eye....even if it was bloodshot most of the time.

As the Irish would say, he never met a stranger.

Christ, he had a heart. Big as the Steamtown Mall used to be. And just as empty some days.

I met him right here. On this stool. I had just written some puff piece about a crossing guard retiring or some shit like that. I was beginning to realize that my Pulitzer was never gonna come.....and I was getting deep into my cups.

Danny was 2 stools down telling the bartender a story about how he bet somebody \$500 that he could beat an Elephant in a race. So he says he bribes the zookeeper at the Nay Aug Zoo to let Tilly the elephant out of his cage, and then shoots off a gun behind the thing's ear so it starts running like hell and Danny runs him down.

You know, complete bullshit.

But then he puts 5 \$100 bills on the bar....

You just never knew with the guy.

He turned to me and said “You don’t believe me?” and I just laughed and he said “good....keeps me honest” and then he bought me a drink.....

(He pauses. Looks toward the mirror behind the bar. Something flickers. He squints. A beat.)

No, it’s just the light. This place has old wiring. Always has. Nothing to worry about. You don’t just see the beer signs in here, you SMELL them.

Danny could light a fire under the soggiest ass. Every idea he had was a bad one but that never mattered in the moment. Just being around him made you feel younger. He was like an electrical current.

Or his own drug.

The wives that he didn’t already screw hated him because they knew he was gonna get their husbands in trouble.

The joke was the worst day you could have in this town was the day Danny decided that he liked you.

He was broken but I never tried to fix him. Hell....what authority does anybody have to do something like that?

Sinners blend in around here.

There’s something wrong with everybody who comes from here....and anybody who landed here and decided to stay.

What the place has is swagger. It will go to war with anyone who refuses to notice that....

(He stops. Looks toward the far corner. A chair creaks though no one is sitting in it. He waits. The room settles.)

This place... it does that sometimes. Old building. Drafts. You know how it is.

Drafty as hell in the winter, but somehow it's still 75 degrees.

It's like the Smurl house.

Anyway....Danny had this way of talking to you, and looking over your shoulder at the same time....like he was looking for another audience.

Or maybe somebody had called his name.

It could be quite disconcerting at first.

There always seemed to be somebody else in the room.

After a while I got used to it. It was part of his charm. I mean....you loved it when he was there, but you didn't really mind when he left.

Both things can be true....but only in bars.

But then there was that night.

(He stops. Long pause. He looks at the bar. At the bottles. At the mirror. Something shifts in the air. He swallows.)

No. Not yet. I can't—just give me a minute.

(remembering what he brought up a second earlier)

The Smurl house. Fuck me. Remember them? That haunting in Pittston. I went down there to interview the family and it was really quiet at the kitchen table. These people looked almost drugged. The kids too.

This was the cliché come to life.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost”

They had that look down....

They were almost whispering about the stuff that happened there....and then the dog suddenly scratched at the screen door to come in and that moment probably took a decade off my life. *(he laughs)*

I didn’t believe them then.

I believe them now.

(almost to himself)

Yea....I believe them now.

Let me tell you something else first. Something small. Something harmless.

There was this night — must’ve been a couple years before... before that night — when Danny got the whole bar to go outside because he swore he heard a train.

A train.

Buddy’s is nowhere near the tracks.

But Danny stands up, holds up a hand like he’s Moses parting the Red Sea, and says:

“Shut up. Listen. It’s coming.”

And we all did.

We all shut up.

We all listened.

And I swear to God —
for one second —

I *thought* I heard it too.

That low rumble.
That distant horn.

That vibration in the floorboards.

Danny walks outside like he's greeting an old friend.
We follow him like idiots.

And he's standing there in the parking lot, staring down the street like the 11:15 from Chicago is about to barrel down Clay Avenue.

Then he says:

"Late again."

And walks back inside.

And the worst part?

We all nodded like that made perfect sense.

He just said such crazy shit with such...panacne....that it was hard not to get swept up.
One night he told us he lost his dog in the bar and had us all looking for it.....peering under tables and shit

Fucker never had a dog

You just couldn't help it.

(He glances toward the door again. A faint tapping? He freezes. Waits. Nothing.)

Probably the wind. March in Scranton — the wind gets ideas. It's looking to fuck up the parade.

I should talk about the night. We're all friends here, right?

It was later than it should be. A school night we used to call it. To some there ain't much sadder than a Monday night midnight bar crowd....but sometimes it felt like looking straight into the sun.

That's where the fun us. Springsteen said that.

Anyway, Danny was here but too sober for my liking. Too quiet. Everybody was waiting for him to pick up the pace of the place....but on this night he was as morose as the rest of us.

Kinda a stark reminder of how much we relied on him.

Anyway, he kept looking toward the door. Toward the windows. Toward the mirror behind the bar. Like he was waiting for someone. Or something.

I asked him what was wrong and he said,

“You don't hear that?”

And I said, “Hear what?”

And he said, “Never mind.”

Just like that. “Never mind.”

And he smiled, but it wasn't a real smile. It was the kind of smile you put on when you're trying to convince yourself you're fine. I got up to put a quarter in the jukebox but he grabbed my arm...

“No, stay”

(He stops. Looks toward the mirror again. Something flickers. He leans forward slightly, squinting. A beat.)

It's nothing. Just the light. This place... it plays tricks.

He told me — no, he didn't tell me. He started to.

He said, "Hackett, I think someone's been following me."

And I said, "Who?"

And he said, "I don't know."

And then he laughed. Too loud. Too fast.

"Forget it," he said. "I'm not drinking enough."

And I let it go. I let it go because Danny said weird things all the time.

Because he liked the drama of it.

But I was tired.

I wanted to go home.

I didn't want to get pulled into whatever mess he was kicking up.

Next thing you know we'd be racing fucking elephants, you know?

But honestly, it was because I didn't want to see what he was seeing.

That fucking dog scratching at the screen door again.

That's what I felt.

(He stops. The room is very still. He looks toward the far end of the bar. A glass shifts slightly. He freezes. Waits. The glass settles.)

Old building. Floors aren't level. We're right on top of a mine. I checked the maps.

The Smurfs were too.

He asked me to stay. Not directly. Danny never asked for anything directly.

He said, “You heading out?” And I said, “Yeah.” And he said, “Already?”

And I said, “Early deadline tomorrow.”

And he nodded. But his eyes... Christ. His eyes.

He looked scared. Not drunk. Not high. Not paranoid. Scared.

And I left.

(He stops. Long silence. He looks at the bar. At the empty stool next to him. At the door. At the mirror. Something in the room tightens.)

I left him here. Alone. In this bar. On that night. When he was seeing things. Hearing things. Feeling things.

And I shouldn't have.

(He takes a long drink. The neon sign flickers. The room seems to lean in.)

I mean I shoulda stayed, right?

Not only as a friend....but as a fucking columnist. This guy was presenting me with a potential JFK gravedigger moment, but I was too sleepy to accept it.

So I went home to a place a lot less welcoming than the bar. And I fucking left him there with the hellhounds on his trail.

And the thing is — the thing I can't shake — is that Danny wasn't wrong.

Not about everything.

Not about the feeling. Not about the presence. Not about the sense that something was... off.

Because when I left — when I walked out into the parking lot — I felt it too.

(He stops. Looks toward the door. A faint sound. A shift in the air. He waits. The room holds its breath.)

No. Not yet. I can't—just let me breathe.

(Lights dim slightly. The room feels closer.)

There's not much of a parking lot. One is reserved for the bartender.

A few others for the guys who put in the long shifts.

But it ain't like the place is gonna need an expansion anytime soon.

So it can feel crowded even when the bar isn't. I felt like choking that night. There's a light back there that flickers like the Yuengling sign.

Like some sort of drunken Morse code.

I remember standing there, keys in my hand, looking at my car like it was a lifeboat.

And behind me — behind me was the bar, and Danny, and whatever the hell had crawled into the room with him. This ain't the kind of place that handles this sort of thing well, you know what I mean?

Suddenly this was no longer shot and a beer territory....no longer “Tell her I'm not here” when the phone rings.

And so now what? I'm gonna go back in and kickstart some supernatural shit?

Fuck that. Guys don't do that shit.

I should've gone back inside.

I should've turned around.

I should've said, "Danny, what's going on?"

I should've stayed.

But I didn't.

I got in my car, turned the key, and drove home like a coward.

And the whole way — the whole goddamn way — I kept checking the rearview mirror.
Not for cops. Not for deer. For... something else.

Something I didn't want to see. Something I didn't want to name.

Whatever it was making all that noise.

(He looks toward the mirror behind the bar again. Longer this time. Like he's daring it to move.)

You ever have that feeling? That someone's in the backseat? Not moving. Not breathing.
Just... sitting there. Waiting for you to notice.

That's what it felt like. Too many goddamn movies.

And I told myself it was nothing.

Just nerves.

Just Danny getting in my head.

He could do that shit. Maybe he was just fucking with me. Pranking me.

That's the thing with Danny. He kinda goaded you into thinking the same way he did.

I got home, poured myself a drink, sat in the dark, and tried to shake it off.

I don't usually need a drink after drinking, you know what I mean?

That is a peculiar Scranton-only phenomenon.

And I didn't sleep. Not a minute.

I sat there listening to the house creak, listening to the pipes groan, I got one of them old radiators that sounds like somebody banging on it with a hammer when it kick-starts from the cold.

And every time I closed my eyes, I saw Danny's face. That smile that wasn't a smile.

Those eyes that weren't looking at me — they were looking past me. Over my shoulder. At something I couldn't see.

He was stone cold sober. That scared me most of all.

I don't mean that in some sort of fake morality way. I mean that Danny was perpetually on the edge of sobriety, and treated this tight-rope like a badge of honor. He had been drinking steadily all night. It was like the booze went off someplace else.

It was strange.

(He takes another drink. A long one. The kind you take when you're trying to drown a memory.)

This place opens at 7am for the 3rd shifters. So the next morning I stopped by even earlier on my way to work. If anyone was there I could just say that I left my jacket or notebook....something like that.

But it was early. I know where the key is. Shit, everybody knows where the fucking key is.

Anyway, as I was putting it in the lock I thought I heard something inside.

I don't know if it was voices, or music, or just the way old bars sound when they are desperate to be opened. But when I stepped inside it was quiet. Dark.

What the fuck was I looking for? Did I expect Danny would still be there?

Dennis is the night bartender and he's a bit of a neat freak when he closes. All the chairs up on all the tables. All the stools pushed in like a man seating a lady.

Except for where Danny was sitting. It was off. Like it had been pulled out from under him.

And the mirror behind the bar —
there was a smudge on it.

A handprint.

Not clear. Not full.

Just the suggestion of fingers.

Like someone had reached out.

Or tried to.

Dennis ain't gonna leave shit like that hovering in the air.

I wiped it off.

I don't know why.

Instinct, maybe.

Or guilt.

Or fear that if I left it there, someone else would see it and ask questions I didn't want to answer.

I told myself it was nothing.

Just grease.

Just condensation.

Just Dennis trying to save himself from falling over laughing at one of Danny's bits.

Maybe Danny had talked him into a few jars at closing time....enough for the guy to say

"Fuck it, I'll clean up tomorrow..."

Just anything but what it looked like.

Something had been in here.

Danny had seen it. It's why he wanted me to stay.

He didn't say anything to anybody else.

Hell, in that place I'm the parish priest who would write all your letters home. Guys call me Shakespeare and shit like that. Nothing mean about it. Just good-natured stuff.

They appreciated what I could do, and this type of ribbing is the way guys around here show it.

So you know, Danny isn't gonna share something like this with Dennis.....or with Billy or Randy or Johnny. Randy had a plate in in head. Johnny's claim to fame was being able to clear out a room on command with one of his farts.

Impressive as hell, but not exactly an intellectual. So you know, Danny didn't have many choices.

And I let him down.

And I know — I know — I'm supposed to tell you what happened next. That's why I came here.

But everytime I do....something moves in here.

(He looks toward the door. A faint sound. Not wind. Not wood. Something else. He stiffens.)

Did you feel that? Did you hear it?

I swear I can make it do that.

Try it again.

Do you hear it?

(Suddenly, “Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress” plays on the jukebox)

You’re not gonna tell me you don’t hear that, are you?

Jesus, it even knows the fucking songs.

(he goes over the pulls the jukebox plug)

No.

Not yet.

Not... yet.

(He breathes. Slow. Controlled. The room holds still.)

I’ll tell you.

I will.

But you gotta let me get there.

You gotta let me walk toward it the way I walked away from it —
one cowardly step at a time.

(Lights dim another notch. The room feels smaller. Closer. Listening.)

End of ACT I

ACT II

(still in the bar....the alcohol is hitting its mark)

There was this place we used to go.

We called it “The Dumps”.

“Up the dumps”

It’s where I’ve seen that look before.

Kids had been gathering there as long as they sold beer in cans.

The floor was littered with them. All rusted. Torn-away Playboy pics. Abandoned forts. Best to have your tetanus shot before you went back there.

It felt isolated, but in truth if my Mom yelled for me to come home I could still hear her.

In this place even your secrets are right on top of everything else.

Adults search for a place like this forever.....and they only die happy if they find it.

(long bear here....remembering)

Just thinking on it now. The dumps then is Buddy’s now.

We all need a dumps. We all need a Buddy’s

My best friend as a child was named Ciarán... this wild Irish kid who just showed up in the neighborhood one day like he owned the place.

There was all sorts of mystery attached to his family — they set the church pews on fire just by moving in

Rumors that his Dad had pissed off the IRA or the Bishop of Donegal or some shit.

Kids love that kind of drama.

Makes your own street feel like a movie set.

But the truth was simpler.

His father worked nights at one of the hospitals — orderly, maintenance, something like that —

He had a brother already here. Easier to run when you've got a destination.

Kids don't care about that stuff.

Ciarán was all that mattered.

He was a force to be reckoned with.

One day I was being picked on at school....and Ciarán showed up and put his hand on the guy's shoulder and said "he's with me"

The kid backed off. Not because he was scared. I think he was too dumb to be scared. I think he was *impressed*...you know?

Like he'd just been told to step away from a moving train.

Because that's what Ciarán was.

A train that was gonna leave with or without you. And if you were lucky — if you were *me* — he'd slow down just long enough to pull you on board.

I was captivated immediately.

It got so we were inseparable. If you were looking for one you'd find the other.

He laughed at everything, even if it wasn't that funny. It got so when he laughed I'd laugh too. I didn't want to feel left out, you know?

The future columnist blood was flowing....so if I felt like somebody else was controlling the narrative I needed to ingratiate myself.

It was Labor Day weekend. "Jerry Lewis Telethon shite" is what Ciarán called it. A few more days and school would be seriously cutting into our boyhood.

We were up the dumps tossing a ball around, lying about girls, doing whatever it is that boys do to avoid growing up.

"I need to tell you something" he said.

This wasn't Ciarán's style. If he had something to say he'd say it. He never laid down any markers.

So I waited...

And then something happened.

"Did you see that" he says

And for once, I did

It was something with the light and something with the shadows and something with the breeze and maybe it was the precise moment that the sun slipped behind the mountains but that happens every night and doesn't cause this kind of...I don't know....JOLT.

(back in the moment now)

It's like the beer sign being plugged in here..

And then we both saw it. A figure. Big. Small. Man. Woman. Fucking bigfoot. I have no idea. I tried to run, but Ciarán grabbed my arm. "No" he said. "Fuck no. Stay"

Then he started pulling me towards it.

The mad bastard.

Suddenly he had the strength of a grown man.

I finally managed to break away as he ran towards whatever it was.

I was paralyzed with fear. I tried to yell out but nothing would come.

The thing moved....and Ciarán went over the ridge after it.

It was then I realized that it was dark now...I had no idea how long any of this was taking.

I found a tree and burrowed myself behind it. I closed my eyes and prayed. I listened for my Mother. I waited for God. For the devil. For Ciarán.

It smelled like rain but the sky was clear.

And then suddenly he was behind me.

“Hackett?” he called out?

How the fuck was he behind me?

(the bar groans....something moves....a chair....a glass...he ignores it)

It was dark but I could see his wild eyes. His pupils were all dilated.

He saw something that he could never unsee.

“Let’s go” was all he’d say. “We have to go”.

No matter how many times I asked him.....that was all he’d say.

“Let’s go”.

And so we ran towards home. We ran until we could not breathe. We reached the streetlight that divided our lives, and he went one way and I went the other.

And he changed.

He stopped laughing. Stopped talking. Stopped coming out to play.

He’d sit in school staring at the door like he was waiting for someone to walk through it. And every time I saw him, he looked thinner, paler, like something was draining out of him.

I tried to talk to him.

“We had to go” is what he’d say. “We had to go”

And then one day his desk was empty.

For a week.

Then a month.

Then the word came down....he was gone. Dead.

Died of something that nobody was about to explain to kids like us.

I never went up the dumps again. Even now I won’t go back there.

So here’s the thing with dreams, right?

They are a simple way to explain away the unexplainable.

Which is why when I tell you that Ciarán was at the foot of my bed the night before he died, you can just say “well the mad bastard was dreaming” and carry on with your day.

Nobody wants to deal with the terrors hidden inside the mind of a child.

I can convince myself that it was a dream as easily as I can convince myself to have one more drink.

That's the thing, right?

But he WAS there.

He asked me if I wanted to know what was out there. He would have told me, but I had to ask.

And I never did. So all he said was "it wasn't for me"....and I don't think I've ever been able to sleep more than 2 hours at a time since.

"It wasn't for me"

What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?

So I did what guys around here are trained to do

I buried it.

Oh, I tried to pray it away first. This seemed a job for Catholicism.

So I asked God what it all meant.

And he answered....

"Shut the fuck up kid. Put some money in the rice bowl and go outside and play..."

Because for a religion based on ghosts, it doesn't handle ghosts all that well.

Angels and virgins is what it deals in.

Nobody down here is either one.

In the movie "Stand By Me" the narrator says "I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?"

That's one of those lines I wish I wrote.

Ciarán tapped into something that nobody else has been able to reach.

I tried love for a while but that didn't work.

Whenever a woman would grab my arm I'd pull away and hide.

I gave it the old Catholic try though.

One marriage, one annulment, another marriage, and then the divorce.

Truth is Ciarán was all I needed, and the memory of him was better than any stand-in.

It was cancer that got him. That's what they told us anyway. There was no wake. No funeral.

His family moved back to Ireland and took him with them.

"it wasn't for me"

That's what he said.

How would you take that?

I wrote about this 1000 times. The wastepaper basket was my editor.

Whatever else happened, it was Ciarán who unlocked the words.

To my parents I was a hopelessly impractical dreamer.....the kind of kid who never enjoyed sunny days because it made rainy ones more statistically likely.

But they never understood.

It was the rain that I was waiting on.

Because that is when you're tested.

I've been searching for live-wires like Ciarán my whole life.

Writing about them....envying them....toasting them.

Ciarán was the book I never wrote. Ciarán was my Pulitzer.

(long beat here. A shift is coming)

And then I met Danny.

And it was almost creepy.

Because Ciarán inhabited Danny the same way Danny inhabited Ciarán.

The same wildness. The same whimsy. The same flashes of lightning. The same air of danger.

They both had this incredible drawing power. If the bar only had them in it, you'd pull up the stool next to them.

Like they were the fireplace and the night needed warming.

(back to his surroundings now....he pours himself another drink)

I'll put it on my tab. It's the honor system 'round here don't you know.

Used to be you could get a draft for 50 cents.

A bottle was a dollar.

I've seen guys lay a \$20 on the bar and not leave until it was gone.

Cue the Archie Bunker song in your head.

Another guy used to drink rum and cokes and save all the straws. At the end of the night you could build a dollhouse with them all.

Now they whack you \$6 for a rum and coke. A Yuengling is \$3.75

It's too expensive to be desperate nowadays.

The times they are a-changing.

(looks around)

Not sure where the extra money is going. It sure as shit isn't being spent on the decor.

I wonder what would happen if you power-washed these walls. How many of my columns would be drained away?

(long beat here.....trying to re-focus)

And you know I should have known better. Danny was way too on the nose.

I'd pushed away scores of people for a lot less than what Danny was asking.

The night I left him here, his was a look I'd only seen once before.

I should have looked at the TV. Or the floor.

Or wandered outside and looked for fucking trains.

But I looked right at him.

And it was that same wide-eyed, hollowed-out stare Ciarán had when he appeared behind me.

And I thought, Jesus Christ, not again. Not twice in one life-time.

I had this feeling, right then.

That something was there.

I saw it that day up the Dumps, but only felt it since.

In dreams.

Or alone in a double bed.

Danny got a good look at it. That I knew right away.

But I could always fall back on past mistakes.

I could always convince myself I was dreaming.

But something was there.

Whatever it was that pulled out that stool, and left that hand print on the mirror.....it was the same thing that took Ciarán from me.

It wasn't there for Ciarán. And it wasn't there for Danny. They were collateral damage. It was there for me. And both times I ran. I never faced it.

So that's why I'm here now. I don't want anybody else to suffer for my sins anymore.

Danny was scared that night. Really scared. Something he was running from had finally caught up with him.

And I knew it all along.

But it just got lost in the fog of Scranton....you know? The fog of war and too many pints and too much manliness.

The irreverence of male friendship

Some nights you just want to go fucking home, you know?

I did not want to pick at a scab that we'd been peeling.....the two of us....over too many shots and too many beers over too many nights

So I just pissed off out of there

(hears a noise)

You hear that?

I swear its listening to us

One of my columns was called "bits and pieces"....and it was the type of thing that I wrote about when I didn't have a fully formed idea. Just little blurbs about A B and C.

There was nothing tying them together. Just a way to fill the 700 words I had to fill.

People talk like this.

In bits and pieces and stops and starts and only guys who spend a lot of time on barstools can decipher this kind of thing.

And so it was that Danny would share bits of his past....

How he once tried to help a complete stranger....said it was clear the guy wasn't right....the guy's eyes were all wild and he was scaring everybody in this South Side bar....and that things got all fucked up and he hadn't been back to that bar since.

And he'd laugh and stop there and it was like you had to wait for the next episode to drop on Netflix or something.

Turns out Danny thought he could fix things....figured he could talk the guy down....call him a cab.

I've seen him do this sort of thing all the time.

Just about everybody in this place has had their nose rearranged by a bottle at one time or another, but not Danny.

He could coax a steak past a wolf.

So this guy gets obsessed. Danny could draw you in. He really could. But this guy was broken....and it just got to be too much.

I didn't know all this then.
Not the whole picture.

Danny only ever gave you the trailer, never the full movie.

He'd say things like,
"Some people don't want help, Hackett. They want a handler."
And I'd laugh, because I thought he was being dramatic.

Danny was always dramatic.

But people started telling me things.

Little things.
Things I should've noticed.

Things I should've asked about.

How some weird guy kept showing up places Danny never mentioned being.
How he'd sit in a booth at the diner and just... watch.

How he'd repeat things Danny said in bars Danny didn't even go to anymore.

And then the slashing —
the thing Danny never told me.

The thing I didn't learn until it was too late.

He never said a word about it.
Not to me.

Not to anyone.

And now I can't stop thinking:
if he'd told me —
if I'd listened —
if I'd stayed that night —

maybe he wouldn't have been alone.

So yea one night the guy slashes at him, really opens Danny up bad.

He gets arrested and gets 5 years.

The whole time he's away he's fixated on Danny...blames him for all his own faulty
fucking wiring.....sends him creepy fucking homemade Christmas cards and shit.

When he finally gets out he starts showing up at the old haunts. Same shit as before.

And he's asking around. And word gets back to Danny. And that's when he started
drinking here.

He knew the guy was broken, and the thing about broken men is they don't need a
reason, only a direction. And his direction was Danny.

You could see it in the way Danny talked about him — not scared of the man's strength, or his size, or even the knife. Scared of the man's *focus*.

That's the thing about Danny.....and Ciarán. They were like bravery weathervanes. They were everybody's Secret Service detail. They'd gladly take a bullet.

When the blood drained from THEIR faces, it was time to fucking worry.

Danny would put a hand on a man's shoulder like he was calming a horse.

In the way he'd smile at someone who didn't deserve it. He had that... softness.

That dangerous softness.

The kind that makes broken men think they've found a friend. Or a target. Or both.

And that stranger — the one with the wild eyes — he saw it. He saw that softness in Danny and mistook it for weakness.

And one night Danny just said it out loud to the mirror. "I'm gonna have to kill him"

And I said "kill who?"

And he goes "the next motherfucker that plays the Hollies on the jukebox."

Sounded reasonable enough to me.

It's amazing what you hear when you want to.

(long beat here)

He couldn't take being someone else's unfinished business.

It ate at him.

Hollowed him out.

Made him smaller in ways only men who've been hunted understand.

That night he asked me to stay....he knew that was his last chance.

The guy was coming for him. It was one or the other. He just wanted one more drink to feel normal again.

And you need to know....I did not get all of this shit at once. It was in bits and pieces.

So by the time I understood it all, it was too late.

That's my cross to bear.

Well, one of them

So Danny goes back to the South Side bar for a few nights, and when the guy shows up there, Danny shanks him in the neck with a broken Yuengling bottle.

And rumor has it the guy died saying "I only wanted to scare you" over and over again. Just some insignificant piece of shit talking tough...trying to live up to whatever the Gremlins in his head were telling him.

And Danny stood over the guy as he bled out and said "Well....that didn't work"

That was Danny's whole life in one sentence.

Every time he tried to help someone who didn't want helping.

Every time he tried to save someone who didn't want saving.

Every time he tried to be the good man in a bad room. It all came down to that one moment, that one sentence, that one quiet admission that he'd finally reached the end of the road.

If I stayed, it never would have happened.

Danny never asked for anything.

Not a ride, not a loan, not a favor.

He was the guy who showed up for everyone else. And the one time — the *one* time — he asked me to sit with him, to just be there, to hold the world steady for one more hour... I left.

And that's the part that kills me.

Because I'd seen that look before.

Once.

Up the Dumps.

(long pause here....)

You know you don't grow up around here so much as you grow around things. I'm an only child. My parents stayed together because it was easier to share smoldering resentments than to allow them to go off on their own. They didn't so much MEET as they COLLIDED. They were young and Irish and were told so many times that sex was sin that they hopped in the first backseat they could find to try it out. People spent the first few years of my life counting backwards on their fingers from my birthday to the wedding date. They just claimed I was pre-mature and nobody believed them but the excuse was all that mattered. My Father did all sorts of odd jobs and once he laid carpeting in the rectory he was back inside the tent again. Faith was fine, but being handy was better. After a few miscarriages my Mom got her tubes tied from a Protestant doctor and for her penance forced me into becoming an altar boy....which lasted until my Father realized that he'd have to take me to the 7am masses I was scheduled for....

For the most part I lived inside my head....inside my room. I had no ghosts of my own to break up the monotony. I wasn't nearly notorious enough to land on anybody's radar, so I stayed invisible in the hallways for years.

We never went anywhere. No vacations. No Sunday drives. If I wanted ice cream I had to steal the money from the sofa cushions and walk down to the shop myself. My Parents loved me about as much as they loved each other, which fluctuated like the stock market. But still, if I scraped my knee my Mom would put a band-aid on it, and my Dad would drive me to places too far to walk. You only get to do this kid shit once, so I figured this was all you could ask for.

And they both died as quietly as they lived. Like they didn't want to bother anybody. I was on my own by the age of 20, and everything happened so fast that I don't think I ever really missed them.

But nothing could ever push Ciarán away. Family isn't given a choice. They were horny one night and I was the result. I'm not sure it's written in stone that this makes you special. But Ciarán chose me. Nobody had ever done that before. In a way he was my first love. Even my wives didn't stand a chance with his memory.

I never felt lonely. That's a coward's word. This place is filled with low expectations. I got my own streets. My own rhythms. I got my own words. My car can drive itself around here. I don't give a shit what's happening in YOUR town. This place is enough to keep me busy. Thousands and thousands of stories. Sit in here some night and dozens walk through the door. I don't have time to tell them all. Take a drive with Danny some night.....it's a fucking Dickens novel. He had Scranton tattooed on his back.

He was the first person who made my heart flutter since Ciarán

And I was hoping he might be here tonight

The whole bar got together and told the police that Danny acted in self-defense. So he was arrested but never charged. That's the sort of thing that only happens in places like this. The cops kinda shrugged and the insurance money paid to get the blood off the floor. Since then? He's gone.

It's like Ciarán's empty desk at school.

(there's a noise...)

You hear that?

That's the sound I heard up the.....

.....Up the dumps.

That's what this feels like....right now

Being up the dumps.

(asking the gremlins in the room...)

Is it time?

Because I remember it now.

What does a grown man want with a 12 year old boy? What is he doing up the dumps anyway. That's our spot.

Ciarán was like Danny. He thought he could fix anything.

But he could not fix this.

I remember his voice got muffled.....like it was clamped shut. And a voice asking him....

“Where's the other one?”

And Ciarán saying “he's gone”. He said it in the calmest voice I'd never heard.

And then they disappeared into the leaves and the brush as I prayed to a God I never believed in...and longed for a voice of a distracted mother.

“Where's the other one?”

“He's gone”

“Where's the other one?”

“He's gone”

Like a mantra I carried that around with me.

“Where's the other one?”

“He's gone”

In reality, it was Ciarán who was gone. It was the last day he was allowed to be a child.

But not before one last confession.

“I know him” Ciarán said.

“What?”

But he was gone.

(long beat here. He takes in the entire bar...including the Yuengling beer sign...which he plugs in)

Look at the light of that thing. It buzzes. That was the light up the dumps

That was the light in the parking lot

That fucking thing has been following me *(laughs nervously)*

And every time it brings regrets.

What else do we have here?

(goes over to the jukebox...sings haltingly to "Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress")

She was a long cool woman in a black dress

What a 5'9, beautiful tall

With just one look, I was a bad mess

'Cause that long cool woman had it all

Hell....fucking thing was probably flickering in the church on my wedding day.

I convinced myself that being alone was strength and love was weakness.

And I think I made a pretty good case.

(speaking to the light now)

What do you think?

Ciarán

Danny

I abandoned them both

If that's love, then my wives got off easy

(takes in the room again)

Bars have memory.

Every creaky floorboard fires off a synapse

That's a good word, isn't it?

A columnist word. My goal is to use all the big ones, and to not repeat myself.

Start using words like that in here you're liable to get your ass kicked but...

I won't tell if you won't

(he stomps on the floor)

When you're full of shit it's sturdy as well. That's what it expects. But when you tell the truth, it can feel like the floor is gonna cave in

(now he knocks on the bartop)

Look at this thing. Fucking thing's been here for 100 years. You don't think it's dealt with assholes like me and Danny before? There's pictures on the walls in here that you could stick the both of us in and nobody would notice.

This place became our confessional. If you've got a good bartender, you don't need a priest OR a therapist

(walks towards the corner table. Chairs are up on it, so he pulls one down to sit)

The light doesn't quite hit over here. So this is where I'd take my legal pad. There's no way I could get anything done sitting AT the bar. That's like trying to write on the roller-coaster. So when I was over here...nobody really bothered with me. It was the space you could go to be left alone. Its privacy was acknowledged by all.

Danny NEVER sat here. Danny willed himself to *not* be lonely.

When I sat here, he looked wounded almost. He didn't roll his eyes the way the other guys did, you know (mimicing them) "oh, fucking Shakespeare doesn't want to be bothered..."

It was more like "what are you doing, man? Don't you know I need you?"

(He stays in the corner seat. The one Danny never sat in. The one that feels like a booth in a church that's forgotten its own prayers. The bar is quiet now. The hum of the Yuengling sign is the only thing that remembers how to speak.)

You know...

I've been thinking about that day up the Dumps my whole life.

Not every day.

Not consciously.

But like the clanking furnace fighting off the cold.

(He looks at the stool beside him. The empty one. The one that's been waiting.)

Ciarán said, "I know him."

And I never asked what he meant.

But I knew this wasn't the first time.

I never asked because I didn't want to know.

And because he said it in that voice — that calm, steady voice he only used when he was protecting me from something.

I thought he meant he recognized a shape.

A shadow.

A presence.

But he meant a man.

A man from our small world.

Our streets.

Our parish.

Our orbit.

A man who should not have been up the Dumps.

A man who should not have been anywhere near children.

And here's the part I've never said out loud:

I knew him too — later.

Not then.

Not when I was twelve.

But years after.

When the world had gotten smaller and the names in the paper started to mean something.

I'd see him mentioned.

Or see him in a restaurant.

Or pass him on the street.

And something in me would seize up — like a phantom pain.

I don't know what I was to him. It's doubtful I was anything. So he carried around no fear of me.

This guy circled the drain of every feel-good story I ever wrote.

And he died with honors....his obit on the same pages as the kid he was after that day.
Before Ciarán took my bullet

Danny didn't know any of this

He didn't know the man....he didn't know Ciarán

Danny didn't know about the Dumps

But he could spot the ones who were circling the drain. The ones who'd already decided on the ending. The ones who wanted to take someone with them.

And always, he'd try to talk them off the ledge.

And the night he asked me to stay

The night he kept glancing at the door like it owed him money —

I knew that look too.

Not because of him.

Because of Ciarán.

Because once you've seen a boy come out of the brush with that expression

That flat, steady, "I'll take the hit so you don't have to" expression

You never forget it.

Danny had it that night.

And I walked out anyway.

I can't sleep anymore because Ciarán came back to me.

Not as a ghost or a dream at the edge of the bed

He came back as Danny.

Not literally — I'm not drunk enough to say that.

But the same heart....the same way of making every room he was in better than it was before.

That was Ciarán

That was Danny

The only persons in this mad world I ever loved

And me with all the Catholicism draped all over me....I denied them more times than Peter denied Christ.

Love ain't like the movies.

The only real love I ever knew was quiet. Steady.

Boring even.

A tossed football. A fake curling league.

Singing along to the Hollies on an old Jukebox.

A hand on my shoulder in the dark.

A boy stepping forward when he should've run.

A man saying "Stay" when he was the one who needed saving.

And what did I do with that? I turned it into stories. 700 words. Little parables about small-town decency and the goodness of ordinary men....in the midst of swirling horror.

If words are all I got left, then let's use them

So I'm going to write it.

All of it.

What happened up the Dumps.

What Ciarán saw.

What he stepped in front of.

What Danny felt coming through that door.

What I refused to face.

And I'll name names.

And if my paper shrinks the same way I did, well I won't blame them

But in this day and age, they don't control the narrative anymore.

Those days have gone away faster than the ads that powered the printing press.

And maybe that's the only grace I've been given.

Because for the first time in my life, nobody can stop me from telling the truth.

Not an editor. Not a publisher.

Not a town that likes its stories neat and its monsters unnamed.

It'll be like an Exorcism

Buddy's will be cleansed, with or without powerwashing the walls

The place won't talk back anymore. It won't kick up a fuss when there are secrets lined up at the bar.

*(he plugs the jukebox back in. Drops a coin in. Plays "Long Cool Woman In a Black Dress".
Puts on his coat and walks out.)*

Blackout

The END