

Tales of the Great Unwashed

Ian Brotherhood

—This blessed shop lies on the bright side of the road, Da would say.

Right enough, *The Great Unwashed* does face South, but I could never fathom why this should be held as a promise of health and prosperity for his offspring. But I know that he was never happier than when the light came bright and morning-fresh upon the gantry, telling him that opening time was round again.

But to be able to smile all the time? To offer warmth and welcome to those I knew he privately dismissed as ‘bad lots’ and ‘shitehawks’? Any cynicism I might have harboured regarding his friendliness was swept away in the final years. Heavy smoking robbed him of both legs. He was getting used to the wheelchair when a whole regiment of cancers invaded what remained of him, reducing his once mighty arms to freckled stick-bags. But hospital was not for him, and he insisted on being taken into the shop every day, where he would lie in an old pram by the end of the bar and partake of his beloved stout via a three-foot long straw which was taped to a pint measure glued to the bar.

—Folk like to gather in the sun, he would also say.

That is surely true, but why we have had (all of us, patrons or otherwise) always to make do with second-hand daylight has also embittered me. Most hours of my working life have been spent in sobriety watching others making the most of a smokey, man-made purgatory. Good friends fallen on hard times have now to stay home with their bottles and cans—that they can no longer afford to enjoy the company of their peers has become intolerable, criminal. They get the best deal possible for a fiver, head home, replay the highlights of friendships, resuscitating jokes and conjure faces with only a flickering box or tinny tape to simulate company.

His passing hit me hard. For more than a year there was not a day passed when I didn’t lock that office door and weep snottily into folded arms, and even now, the unexpected mention of him summons cold fingers which claw at my chest and nip at my eyes. It’s all the worse because I know I’ll never be him. Here are knuckles gnarled; eyebrows ridged and heavy scars all over to prove that I was never one to suffer the ignorant or the offensive in silence. I don’t think Da ever raised a hand to anyone, but there is no debating who was the stronger, wiser man.

The Great Unwashed sits atop one of the city’s drumlins. A drumlin is a glacier’s jobby, and the pub is perched on one of the biggest. The road leading down to the city-centre is steep, and from the office I watch locals coming up the hill very slowly, others descending it at thrice the speed, knees buckling under their own momentum.

Being so close to the night-clubs and the exotic eating-houses which cater for the beer-addled of the night, the streets are always busy at dark, but few souls venture up the hill in sobriety without good reason. When they are drunk they get lost, and imagine they are taking short-cuts. They wander about the hill’s orange streets, dropping food from greasy wrappers, or evacuating it in garish gushes along the gutter. In the early hours, before the sun has touched the horizon, great flocks of seagulls come swooping in from the coast to see what they can find. I’ve always liked to watch birds, but these gulls are a menace. They swarm threateningly above the pavements, crawling claims before dropping heavily onto pieces of pakora, fish-batter, filth-encrusted jumbo sausages, hardened vomit and whatever else they can find to cram into their steel-lined gullets. As I sit alone at the bar at the shift’s end, I see their shadows reel upon the window, and curse them. Parasites. They invade even my sleep, and will not retreat until the city itself is up and about.

So I go to work this day, baggy-eyed and hateful. An audit is looming, the stock is bad, there has been pilferage of late, the new beers I brought in have not been shifting. And it is Autumn now, that point when, almost without warning, there will be a shifting of clock-hands and we must face another six months in the Twilight Zone. And those effing gulls will bolster their numbers as the sea roughens.

—A late night was it then, asks Joe ‘Doghead’

Ryan, but I ignore him.

I watch Frankie, the new barman, as he wipes down the sink-boards. Nice lad. Has he been passing twenties over the bar, or maybe leaving forty-gillers outside by the bins for friends to collect? I can’t see it, don’t want to, but someone is at it and I’m right in the mood to catch them today.

A metallic clank from the cellar betrays the presence of Halfpint Fraser. He was a friend of the old man’s, and is still on the books as cellar-man. He is in his late seventies. I’m still watching Frankie when the steely echo from downstairs becomes a sudden roaring gush beneath which Halfpint’s screams can be faintly heard. I race to the head of the stairs. The cellar appears to be filling up with foam. In the midst of the dull kegs, Halfpint lies, bunnet still intact, surrounded by dozens of soaked bread rolls, an angry ejaculation of lager battering onto the ceiling from the keg beside him.

Ten minutes later, Halfpint stands in a puddle of warm lager in the office as I hand him his week’s pay and tell him not to come back. A tear or two mingle with the sweet beer as he accepts the notes without a word, then turns sadly for the door. I quell the pang of regret. Business is business. Eighty pints or more lost. Truth be told, it was just the excuse I’d been waiting for.

And that is but the start. The afternoon is dull and unusually warm. We get busy for no reason I can see. There is a large crowd of lads doing a rehearsal for a stag-night, and they’ve clearly taken up where they left off the night before. Frankie takes objection to the manner of one of them. Threats are exchanged. Joe helps me to escort the lads to the door. Then I get Frankie into the office and tear a strip off him. The customer comes first. You might be a Ned in your own time, but not in here. Da’s stock phrases come from nowhere, but I can’t say them with that same tone, that understanding. I warn him, and he is ashen when he gets behind the bar.

—You’re run-down and that’s a fact, says Joe.

—And you’re a doctor now? I reply, still fuming.

Doghead thrusts stodgy fingers into his waistcoat pocket and draws out a small pinkish pellet.

—Get this down you, he says.

I take the pill from him. The coating crumbles slightly as I roll it between my fingers. There is a faint impression of the letter ‘S’ upon it.

—Supervitamin pill, and a mighty cure for the stress and the hangovers so it is, says Joe.

There seems no harm. I throw it down with a swally of watered lime juice. Maybe I do need a pick-me-up, but I’ve never been one for pills and that. I get back into the office and spend the mid-afternoon lull trying to get the papers ready for the accountant. They make no sense. Well, they don’t really matter any more. In fact, by five or so they are as good as a joke book, and I leaf slowly through them, laughing aloud at VAT numbers and profit projections.

—So that’s perked you up I see, says Joe.

He is well-gone now is Doghead, but I offer him my hand and shake his long and hard.

—Thanks Joe, you’re a pal. There’s one in the tap for you.

I watch Frankie battering away, pouring three pints at once, chatting to a regular. He hasn’t had a break all day. I get behind the bar and help. I feel great. I get him at the till.

—Sorry about earlier son, I say. Go get some grub and take yourself a pint.

He eyes me suspiciously, as I was watching him that morning.

—We all have off-days lad. Don’t be taking it personal.

I whistle ‘Dirty Old Town’ and stay behind the bar until the evening shift come on. I never normally work day-time but I feel strong, keen, even cheerful. Some of the regular boys ask me if my numbers have come up.

—This place is on the bright side of the road, I say, and those of them who don’t remember Da look confused.

By seven I’m as happy as I’ve ever been. It’s almost

as if I can feel Da still in the place, the smell of him, the sound of his loaded breathing, the waft of his tobacco. I could never have worked anywhere else, my life could never have been any other way, and I wouldn’t want it different anyroad. Every customer is a friend, and even those with stern faces and short manners are my bread and butter and I love them all. I get among them, shaking every hand within reach, embracing those I’ve known for years but never spoken to. It feels like New Year, the favourite child’s eighteenth, a perfect wedding bash all rolled into one. But then there is a pang and I rush back to the office.

It takes but a second to locate Halfpint’s phone number, but I have to organise myself before calling. I’m almost in tears as I ask him to come back tomorrow. He is quiet. I beg, apologise, cite Da as our common link. He grunts consent.

Midnight comes. I am not in *The Great Unwashed*. They can close up themselves, and even if they don’t they’ll take care of it no bother. I’m in the Spring, laughing so hard I can hardly breathe. There is Jacko the Wobbler I haven’t seen for twenty years, Sammy the Biter, Mickoleen and sundry others. Someone has been married, they’re all suited and well-oiled. It’s a lock-in, and it’s maybe two or three when I leave, shirt unbuttoned and tie lost.

A cab drops me. There are words with the driver, and I throw a handful of change at him. The chippie is closing, but they have some fritters left, and aye, put that pie in there as well.

I fall at some point going back up the hill to the work. Suddenly cold, I try to work out where my jacket is. I cannot raise my head from the pavement. I start to slide down the hill, back towards the main drag, where I can hear gigantic frogs slapping their way to the West End, and worms like drainpipes wrestling in the gutters. A smell bears down, and it is sheer foulness—burned garlic, bean-filled ash-trays and toenails made of old cheese. The smell becomes a wave of filthy air, and then I know that something is above me. I manage to raise myself and face the sky. A plane-sized gull is hovering high, eyeing me. I bury my face in my arms and cry out as I smell the bastard lower. It lands astride me with feet like deflated dingys. With its beak it flips me over. On the end of this beak there is a splintering of orange bony fingers. It ties my shoelaces together, hooks them over the lower bill, rises from the road and soon we are high above the city.

There is light rain falling as the thing flies backwards across the town. I am upside-down, limp and helpless as landmarks skite by above me. I retch and boak but nothing emerges. The screeching of the traffic on the motorway becomes the laugh of the bird as it drops towards the riverside by the old docks. It stands high above, watching me. It lowers the beak, lifts me up for a second, then lets me drop and tears off my legs with one great snap.

There is no pain. It swallows my legs, raises its head and cries to whatever giant may be about. And then it leaves, heading back to the sea.

So I was released from the jail about mid-day. Charges might be brought. Drunk and Disorderly. Placing people in a state of fear and alarm. I threw up outside the station but there was nothing but bileish spit. A cab got me back to *The Great Unwashed*.

Joe was slumped in the corner by the juke-box, soaked in his own fluids and covered with empty crisp-bags. A dozen or so others, including Frankie, occupied the Snug in various states of slumber, only one being full awake.

—It’s yourself, said Sippy Pat.

A far-off gull cried. The juke-box was playing *Van the Man’s Bright Side of the Road*. I walked unsteadily over to the power point, ripped the plug from the socket, then went to the office and sobbed until the accountant arrived.