

Looking Back by Stephen White

The morning silence was broken by the usual dulcet tones of the newsreader on the 'wireless'. The somber words along with the sound of the whistling kettle and the smell of burning toast wafted upstairs from the warmest room in the house. The dial on the radio was fixed by my father at RTE One and as was the norm now the headlines was the violence erupting in Northern Ireland and Maggie Thatcher going head to head with the IRA and the Hunger strikers.

As I held my customary morning conference with my reflection in the stained bathroom mirror, it was agreed that the reason we had been dreaming about Maggie Thatcher last night was because she was constantly on the news and that the dream had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with the conversation me and the lads were having the other day about older women. The who you might fancy chat, only as a joke by the way and listen we were talking about Raquel Welch, Liz Taylor and Bridgette Bardot and the like. It was 'Pee Pee' Murray who suggested Maggie Thatcher and he would have been snared rapid if it wasn't for 'Snitchy' Mc Gee coming around the corner with that can of beer. Pee Pee got away with it but its been on my mind ever since.

Any way to move on to item two on the agenda. The very noticeable monstrosity on my face that resembled mount Vesuvius . It seemed no matter how much of my sisters make up I used it wouldn't stay hidden. My acne was so bad now that my spots were getting spots.

The loud banging and shouting on the bathroom door from my adoring siblings signaled the conclusion of this morning's conference.

As I two stepped down the stairs and was just about to make a break for the front door my mother stopped me in my tracks. "Alex please be sure to come straight home from school today, we need to have a talk."

"Sure," I muttered keeping my head down so she wouldn't notice the makeup. It took some time to dry and crust over before it didn't look like girls make up, but bumpy orangey skin. Anyway I eventually broke free and set off for the 'early bus'. This was the one Tina (and most likely that creep Kavanagh) would be on. The alternative to the 'early' was the 'quarter past' and that was slow, packed, and more than likely 'Tina-less'.

Also the 'quarter past' as it slowly rattled its way through the traffic laden roads of Dublin would produce a potent sleep inducing mixture of diesel and tobacco vapor (smoking on the 'upstairs' of buses was almost compulsory in the early 1980's). I didn't mind sleeping it was the invasion of a certain prime minister into my dreams that was worrying me.

The quarter past also meant dealing with Percy, the potbellied, face gurning, know-all bus conductor, who always seemed to be on whatever bus I was taking.

That intervention by my mother meant I had now to run if I was to have any chance of catching Tina. As I pounded the pavement I recalled yesterday's conversation and her suggestion about my hair, as in 'do something with it, anything, but lose the mop.'

Red hair seems to attract unsolicited comments from all comers including Percy who would entertain the passengers on the 16C with, "How ye Ginger, Fred not with you today?" Oh how he laughed at that one every day (sometimes twice on the same day).

According to Jack Mac (my best buddy in school), the fact that Tina commented on my hair, was a sure sign that she was interested in me. What did that say about Percy?

"Girls always want to change you" the worldly wise playboy Jack informed me. Jack having 'warded a mot' was way ahead of me when it came to the opposite sex. That and his Northside upbringing. North-siders have the edge over Southsiders when it comes to sex. The girls really enjoy it. Fake jewelry but real orgasms is what Jack says.

I was thinking a centre parting for the 'gruaige' as I rounded the corner and saw the bus doors close with a loud hiss as it separated the almost rans from the nearly departed.

"There's an extra behind," the driver shouted. Eventually the 'extra' rounded the corner with 'guess who' stood front and center, picture-framed by the thick rubber around the windscreen. This was Percy's moment, he would decide who would travel on his Charabanc. I positioned myself in front of an attractive couple that Percy was sure to allow on board. "Seats on top," he announced to the boarding passengers, drenching them with his spittle.

I found a seat at the back where the smokey diesel and warm vibrating seats sent me ,as expected, into a trance like slumber.

"That's the trouble with people these days, too many of them are just relying on other people to solve their problems. Their problems, young Alexander. They should get up earlier or get a bike and cycle if they have to be somewhere at a certain time." There I was in the backyard of number 10 Downing Street. Maggie Thatcher, her head popped around the back door, her blue curlers still in situ and a cigarette hanging from her lips.

One eye blinking from the smoke, she beckoned me from behind the washing line that was drying her blue undergarments. As she opened the door, she revealed herself in a very tight-fitting blue silk dressing gown. Her bosoms were like loaded missiles and one of them was aimed right at me.

"Come in Alexander, sit," she said. I sat across from Denis Thatcher who ignored me and continued to read his newspaper.

"That will be all Dinny," she said. He got up and took his Daily Telegraph which concealed a copy of the 'saucy Sun' and left.

"Don't think I didn't see that" she called after him. Placing a blue floral designed china cup and saucer in front of me, she poured a cup of steaming hot tea. She sidled up to me and pulled my head to her bosom and said,

"Alexander," she always called me Alexander. "Forget Tina, you need someone more mature."

As I sat there surrounded by her bosoms I could hear her muffled speech about Northern Ireland and the hunger strikers . I knew I'd never go hungry where I was. It was so comfortable there and I just wanted to nuzzle up and sleep forever. I could hear Maggie's muffled tones as she said "You can't make an omlette without breaking some balls," But as far as my balls were concerned I have to say I—

"GINGER," roared Percy, his big sweaty belly pressed into my face. That's ten pence more you owe me, you paid to Kelly's corner that was two stops back.

I managed to escape his sweaty blubbery clutch and jump of the moving bus.

The extended bus ride had now caused me to be late for school so rather than trying to sneak in to 'double Biology', I headed for Dirty Dans the school chipper/ coffee shop, home for unpunctual and wayward school children. I would take refuge there till first break. It was at break when my buddy Jack came in, his creased forehead warned of bad news.

"Alex where were you? 'Kojak' is swinging the leather, looking for you" (all bald teachers in the eighties were nicknamed Kojak). "He's called you Alexander the Late and says Memnon awaits ."

I explained to Jack about my mother's interception that, although minimal it put my timing out by quite a bit. His reaction to this piece of seemingly innocuous information threw me. He stopped mid-bite into his 'Marathon' bar and looking at me wide-eyed and running his hand through his wispy pale blonde hair (inspirationally parted in the middle) he asked,

"Did she say chat or talk?"

"Jesus Jack, I can't remember exactly, why?"

"I'll tell you why Aleco me auld buddy, if she said 'talk' it's not good.

"Jack, what are you on about?"

"Al, the 'Talk' is the facts of life, the how babies are made. The 'it's more than a special hug,' talk. I had to stop my mother as she started to explain how she and me Da made babies."

"Jaysus, how'd ye stop her?"

"I told her I already knew and that we had covered it in school. Alex, this is what you're going to have to do unless you want to hear things about your Ma and Da making babies, and Jesus wept Al, there are seven of youse. Then there's all the stuff about personal choice, protection, condominiums and French people writing to each other."

"What will I do?"

“Alex, as soon as she starts, tell her you know everything. You can tell her I told you cause my Ma told me and we spoke to one of the priests to make sure we had our facts right. Sero bero Al, you do not want to hear your Ma talk about sex.”

I don't, I thought.

This is one conversation I won't be having. I was dreading going home. The bus journey home was usually occupied with either a chat with Tina or a game of 'would you rather' with Barney (a 'bus only' friend).

But today no Tina, no game. Barney wasn't speaking to me as I 'accidentally' broke his 'nudie pen'. No loss though as my impending 'Talk' with my mother was on my mind.

So now I was home I waited and it seemed forever until she called me into the sitting room. The sun's rays caught the smoke swirling up from her cigarette and her smoking told me this was serious.

“Sit down Alex, I need to tell you something.”

“Mam you don't need to say anything. I already know,” I said.

“What?”

“I heard –”

“Oh Alex, did you hear your father and me the other night?
I thought the house was empty—”

“What? No. Jesus Ma. Please, flippin hell. I was going to say I heard about it in school, Jack told me.”

“Jack?” she said.

“Yeah, his mother told him and we checked our facts with a priest and he told us that we were correct.”

“His Mother? A priest? What priest?”

“Father Donnelly.”

“What exactly did Father Donnelly say?”

“Not much really, just “that's right boys,” after we had gone through everything Jack's Ma told us.”

“And how does Jack's mother know?”

“Eh Ma, all the adults know.”

“They do? So, seems I’m the last one to find out.”

“What? What do you mean last to find out? Flippin hell when did you find out?”

“The other night, I had my suspicions something was up but it was only when your father decided to tell me that I realised what was going on.”

“Wait, you had your suspicions? I mean what did you, like how were, surely you, flip sake there are seven of us, I mean, what the fu-”

“Language Alex.”

“Sorry.”

“Seven of who?” she said.

“Us, your children,” I said.

“Oh, Alex you guys are not to blame –”

“Eh, I know that, we weren’t around until you and Dad decided to—”

“Decided to what Alex? What do you think I’m talking about?”

“The ‘Talk’.”

“What Talk?”

“The talk about babies, special hugs, protection from the church and the French postal system.”

My mother began to simultaneously laugh and cry. Lighting a new cigarette from the old, inhaling and then on the exhale, she said,

“Your father and I are separating. He is moving out and leaving us. He has met someone else.”

I can’t remember the rest of the conversation. There was the usual it’s ‘no reflection on you’ and ‘we will always be here for you’ bit, but she never expanded on who the someone else was and thankfully at the time never mentioned it was a ‘he’ who had recently left the priesthood.

Still, my head was thumping with the information I had. I was weak at the knees. After a few minutes of silence, she asked was I okay and if I had any questions. I had a million of them,

my first being could we now listen to something other than RTE news in the morning. But in truth I was dazed and felt like I'd been hit by one of Brother Lamb's famous uppercuts.

I still remember poor old Barry McKeown who, after back-to-back biology and religion lessons taught by the infamous Brother Lamb, where in Biology he explained female impregnation via the penis and then forty minutes later in religion informed us of Mary's impregnation, not by Joseph or anyone else's penis but by God's blessing or something.

Lamb while wiping the board, asked (rhetorically) "any questions?"

Mc Keown, hand raised and ignoring the collective gasp from his classmates, uttered those now immortal first few words,

"Brother, did God have a long invisible Mickey that he could—"

The last we saw of Barry was him being carried out of the class unconscious. I now know how he felt.

The next day Jack was waiting for me at the school gate. Jack, if he hadn't anything himself to worry about, would borrow someone else's problem until his own anxieties returned.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"What?" I said, downplaying the situation.

"Your Ma, the 'Talk'?"

"Ah that, nah it was nothing, just about music lessons and stuff."

We drew hard on the shared cigarette and then the shout went up warning of the Principal's approach. Twenty-five cigarette butts flew like fireflies through the air and the yard was quickly vacated.

There were no further questions from Jack, besides, he had found a new worry of his own. Some random guy asked him if he was an albino because of his wispy blonde hair. That comment and his pubic hair or lack of, was now causing him some angst. I was going to tell him about Maggie Thatcher but I thought better of it.

The weekend came and went and on Monday morning my father drove me to school so he could say goodbye or at least try to. I met Jack and we were fairly sure that he was not an albino and his pubes would thicken in time. He liked my centre parting, but the bus home would be the real test.

That afternoon with hope in my heart I boarded the 16C bus. I saw Tina, I also saw Kavanagh sitting beside her. Tina barely gave a glance at my hard-worked hairstyle. Percy approved though with a "look at you Ginger." I sat alone tired of the whole thing and began

to snooze. I could hear Tina and Kavanagh behind me, giggling, a couple's giggle. I wanted to turn around and look. Then it came,

"No, Alexander, don't look back, WE ARE NOT FOR TURNING..."

The End.