

The King of Kilkenny

The black river has been bed to a dead man for the past night, washed his skin to scales. Floating he was, since sun-up, when they came and dragged him from the tall grass, yellow and flaky like fungus. He probably tripped and fell I told them, had a few drinks and lost his footing. They looked at me and kept talking. Gardaí with mobile phones, showed pictures to and fro, and laughed. I could have told them things, but they saw my beer can and they huddle-talked and chalked me down as no-trusting.

This is me - King John. I slept under the bridge last night. Woke up at dawn. No-one about except a fox and a few rabbits, and me leaning against the walls of Kilkenny Castle; steam ghost-rising off the river and him face down, nudging the long grass.

I get lost looking at the river - stare at it for hours, especially on a day like this. Takes me places. Even ones I've never been. Perfectly flat, breaking at a fish mouth and rippling in circles.

An ambulance comes in the back way around the castle and puts the body in a bag. Men get masked-up and nod to each other. Diver's fins flip-flop backwards, leaking. Gardaí look at each other, waiting for the go-time. It's given and they fast-reel in the tape and the sandwich signs, and everything disappears, like a reverse film. All that's left is a pool of water on the path.

Sun's raring. Heat from it cores to my marrow and I'm buzzing. Stroke my beard and shake my head just thinking about it. Hop from one foot to another and grin at the beautiful day. Try to remember a conversation, a funny one about being

caught out in the sun, blister-red and firing. Makes me laugh. Takes my mind off the dead man's black teeth through a cheek hole.

Two ladies pass, all pink and purple, hair stripy blonde and fast-walking. I pretend I'm looking for something. Like my newspaper. Every day I read it, full to the brim of how the nation's wealth was dribbled down bank chins. How champagne kings gambled gold-studded futures, touched the flesh of beautiful young women and felt the cold, hard edge of wealth. I celebrate them. I raise my can to them. I remain the popular perception of rock bottom.

There's a hotel across the river. New. Square with a flat roof and grey. Inside, one thinny flower stands on white shrouded tables. Waiters, starch-pressed and combed, with flip books and pens, carry trays of ruby red orange juice, sugar-shimmer pastries bricked high, bacon, black pudding, kippers, and fleshy tomato orbs. The smell stuffs my nose and I get the frothy taste of old beer on my beard. *A bachelor's life is a fine breakfast, a flat lunch, and a miserable dinner.* I read that on the menu board outside the hotel.

Faces melt there now from the night before, arms on railings, puffing at cigarettes. Their gaze scoots over the water to me. I raise my can. Some salute, but most look away, and that's when I check my pockets, inside and out. It's a thing I do to pass the time. I've eight in total. Four inside and four out. I've them numbered. Sometimes I go in sequence. Sometimes backwards. Sometimes the odds and then the evens.

The heat is fierce and I lean into the wall. Reedy-thin I am, and I slope down on one side. I try to stand straight. I'm here to see my daughter - through the big hotel

windows with the clawed back curtains. A princess, she will glide, in her long dress, jewelled hair shiny as a racehorse, and fingers fanning.

The sight of her spears me rightly. She dazzles, more than beautiful. She's out there on the balcony for a photo, looks down the river and bounces off the sun. I start hopping, lifting my legs one at a time and stroke my beard. She turns and gives me a wave, I think. Words to him husband, that make him turn away, but I raise my can all the same. She puts her hand out like she's flattening sand and they move inside, brush-whipped by her train.

I'm breathing too fast, and rest on a metal box, grab my can and swirl the honey-gold liquid inside. She'll come back out and wave over, ask me to join in. I'll wait here for it.

A young lad walks up and opens the metal box. Didn't see him coming. Clocks my can resting on top. Got himself a good job, a neat haircut and a uniform. I hide the can in pocket two, and count them: two, four, six, eight; one, three, five, seven. Tool box down and he starts checking wires. "Beautiful morning," says I. He agrees. Takes wires, clips some, makes notes and that is that. Closes the box, picks up his bag, wishes me good luck and heads back to the bridge. I ran out of time. I wanted to tell him about my days opening up the same spaghetti junctions, except twice the size, in all kinds of weather, sleeping in the van when it was too late for home, or after I'd had a few drinks.

Heat's up and getting on for mid-morning, scorching down on my head. My hair's thin and the skin is raw from scratching. A hat would do. I had one but it got taken. Always the same. The getting is hard and keeping is harder.

Another visitor to the court of King John. Salutes from the top of the bridge and makes his way along the path, bag in one hand; fast and straight, with arms bent and feet pointed. A right character. Tilts his chin over and over, like he can't stop saying hello.

"How things?" he says, flicking. "Beautiful day."

"Beautiful. Long may it last, please God."

He unzips the bag and reaches inside for a can of Strongbow, dripping cold and wet against my palm.

"I bought an extra one. Thought you could do with it," he says. His big finger tips grip the top of the can, the bottom he points at me.

"God bless you." I put my other hand deep inside pocket seven, and feed a coin through my fingers.

"Who was it?" he says, head flicking to the long grass.

"No one I know."

"That's too bad. Was he pushed? Someone should leave flowers."

I nod and look over at the long grass and try to think of words to keep him there.

"Right," he says, "I'll see you."

He turns to walk, zips up the bag and flicks his head at my raised can, keeps going along the river path right to the bend, then vanishes.

There's a noise from under the bridge. Kids, up on the pedals, laughing, jackets flying back, shoes with flash lights. Kids with dusty skin. They brake too near to me, their wheels slicing the dirt as they grip and release the brakes.

“Give us one,” a small kid says, his black eyes at my can.

“You’re too young,” I tell him.

“*You’re too young.* No we’re not. Go on Mister.”

I shake my head and tap my hand against the castle wall, but they line up in front of me like a fence. I’m not so different from their fathers, standing on my own early morning, drinking beer and talking to myself. But they don’t know me.

“You stink Mister.” They sit back on their saddles, hold their noses and squint at the sun.

I can’t focus good and their distraction gets me muddled. I say what I think is right, but they don’t understand. I used to ride crossbar when I was their age. Rigid steel digging into my thighs, my friend Eoin’s chin bouncing off the top of my head. Their spittle lands on my shoes. An old couple, my age, pass. I smile, but they don’t look.

I turn away towards the river, pretending that I’ve seen something of great interest. The smooth curve of the water dug so precisely into the earth; the reflection of the castle towers and the bright blue sky. They shout at me and cycle on, the dust pricking my lips.

My next visitor I was expecting. He strides quick, hands in pockets. Her husband. Cigarette, squashed between thumb and finger, is thrown across his chest and into the river. Smoke spews from the side of his mouth, twisted so that his eyes still fix on me. Stones break like bullets as he walks, skim the surface, on course, no turning back. Quick as a flash, he’s at me. His face goes slack, in shadow with the

river behind him and the castle in front. His eyes are so wide that mine flit, go no where, to try and find a rest point. They do, finally, on his waistcoat buttons.

“What are you doing?” He says this with his face turned, towards the bend in the river, hands still in his pockets.

I grip the base of my can. Anger won't let him look at me. I stare down the river too, at a child leaning over, held on to by a young girl. Anchored.

“Look at you.” But he's not. “Do you know what I'm going through over there? For feck's sake John. On today of all days. Do us all a favour and give it up. Is it money you want? Or is it something else?” He lights another cigarette, hands cupped, spider web tattooed on the span. “I'm supposed to give these up. That's what you're doing to me you miserable fecker. I'd hit you but you're not worth it. There's already been one body in the river. I suppose you saw all that. Oh yeah, you wouldn't miss it. A corpse. You probably fecking pushed him.”

The burning cigarette flicks to my feet. I want to pick it up. He has his arms crossed, waiting to see if I do; a metal ring through his eyebrow. A hole in skin stretched tight. He glances at the bridge, sees a ban garda and his grin goes. I think drunk later with eyes half closed, slobbering over my daughter, drooling down her dress and grabbing her breasts.

He leans towards me, his breath whiskey sour. “Just leave us alone.” His fingers reach through my paper-thin flesh to pinch my ribs, so brittle they could snap. Next, he's at my pockets, pressing me down with his other hand, finding coins and tossing them high into the water. I don't care, let him claw pinch all that rubbish. Except, I remember too late, and he has it, the tiny frayed picture. He tears it so the parts

scatter, fragments so small I can't catch them, even though I'm grabbing air and his head is shaking. "You poor bastard."

He twists on the stones, shoes dusty white, and strides back to the bridge, past her like he didn't know she was coming.

She saw me when she walked over the bridge about an hour ago. I forgot to move on. I forgot that she'd be back with her dark blue uniform and light brown eyes. She's up to me sudden, before I can straighten out. She stands and rocks slow, reaches across her shoulder to turn down the radio.

"Hello John."

"Sergeant," I say, casual like, sliding the cans inside my jacket like I'm ready to move on. Her foot moves over photo bits that I want to reach for.

"You've been here a while. I seen you when I was doing my walk early this morning." She turns to the hotel, hands on hips. "Big day. Your daughter's wedding over there in the hotel and a body in the river. You know him John?"

I shake my head.

"You're here every night. Would be hard to miss anything." Like the husband, she talks down river. "Best not have any bother or arguments here today. You must have worked up quite a thirst. Why don't you go and sleep it off?"

"I will Sergeant, I will." I smile at her, thinking what that shiny hair would feel like, trying to remember the last time I touched a woman. Check my pockets: two, four, six, eight.

"By the time they're finished over in the hotel, you'll be tired of standing." She smiles and frowns together. "You know where I am if you remember anything,

John. Awful to think his family don't know and no one to see him buried. I'll be back this way in an hour. Make sure you take those empties with you."

I put my hand to my brow and look sky bound as she heads inside the castle.

Photo parts. As many as I can. Piece together like a jigsaw on top of the metal box, but there are holes. Bits missing that got away with the wind. Me and my daughter, together, holding hands. I put my finger in the holes to stop-gap them, but there are too many missing and in the end it's no picture at all.

That ban garda should have given me more time. Things have been left rotten bad with my daughter and now I'm told to find a bed at the shelter. No joy in that. A pissy, sweat smelling mattress and scratchy blanket on my face, hands in my pockets as I sleep, and scab sore. A place full of no-hopers, shouting in their sleep, the end of life creeping into the blackness. No rest there for the living, only those dying. Like that corpse from the river, slabbed-out now in the morgue, peeled back by a knife, poking inside.

I glance over to the hotel one last time for my daughter. My eyes meet the black river, stretched out. It swells with the eventide, and buffs the long grass , until it curls up the bank and slides to fish-tail around my toes.

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