

A Powwow on the Rises

Directly across the bowl of the city from Beauvista was the rude expanse of the Northside Rises. The aborigines of Bohane had over the years bred themselves too plentiful for the narrow wynds of the Back Trace – long winters, dark nights, romantic natures – and flatblocks were built on the Rises to house the overflow. Trace and Rises families are almost all blood-related, if you go way back, and this perhaps explains the depth of the bitterness between them.

The Rises is a bleak, forlorn place, and violently windy. Too little has been said, actually, about living in windy places. When a wind blows in such ferocious gusts as the Big Nothin' hardwind, and when it blows forty-nine weeks out of the year, the effect is not physical only but ... philosophical. It is difficult to keep a firm hold of one's consciousness in such a wind. The mind is walloped from its train of thought by the constant assaults of wind. The result is a skittish, temperamental people with a tendency towards odd turns of logic. Such were (and are) the people of the Northside Rises.

This particular noon, however, as Ol' Boy Mannion loped stylishly along the wasted avenues of the Norrie terrain, an October lull still governed. On either side of the avenues, the flatblocks were arranged in desolate crescent circles, and the odd child leapt from a dead pylon, and dogs roamed in skittish packs, but mostly it was quiet, for the Rises is by its nature a night-time kind of place.

Tipping seventy, Ol' Boy dressed much younger. He wore low-rider strides, high-top boots with the heels clicker'd, a velveteen waistcoat and an old-style yard hat set at a frisky, pimpish angle. Ol' Boy had connections all over the city – he was the Bohane go-between. He was as comfortable sitting for a powwow in the drawing room of a Beauvista manse as he was making a rendezvous at a Rises flatblock. Civil a bit stirred in the Trace that he didn't know about, nor across the Smoketown footbridge. He was on jivey, fist-bumping terms with the suits of the business district – those blithe and lardy boys who worked Endeavour Avenue down in the Bohane New Town – and he could chew the fat equably with the most ignorant of Big

Nothin' spud-aters. The Mannion voicebox was an instrument of wonder. It mimicked precisely the tones and cadence of whoever he was speaking to, while retaining always a warm and reassuring note. Hear him on Endeavour and you'd swear he had shares in the Bohane First Commercial; hear him out on Nothin' and you'd swear he was carved from the very bog turf.

Ol' Boy, bluntly, was political.

He approached now a flatblock circle of the Cusack mob. A gent name of Eyes Cusack waited for him on the diseased green space out front of the blocks. He leaned back, brooding, against a burned-out generator shed. He smoked. He acknowledged Ol' Boy by dropping his tab and stomping it, and the men embraced, manfully and briefly.

'Things with you?' enquired Ol' Boy.

Eyes was named so for good reason. He saw the city through tiny smoking holes set deep in a broad, porridgy face.

'Lad o' mine wearin' an eight-incher of a reef 'cross his chest,' he said. 'Smoketown.'

'Heard there was an incident alright,' said Ol' Boy. 'Will he pull through for you, Eyes?'

'Well, he ain't gonna be botherin' no dancehalls for a time. An' this is a nephew o' mine, Mr Mannion. This a lad o' me brud's, like? I said blood? Me brud's gone loolah on accoun' and his missus gobbin' hoss trankillisers like they's penny fuckin' sweets, y'check me?'

He was bald and stout, Eyes Cusack. He was in a vest top, trackies and boxer boots – the standard uniform of a Rises hardchaw this particular season – and he wore an unfortunate calypso-style moustache.

'I'd say hold off on things for a breath or two, Eyes, if you can at all.'

The Mannion tone was pitched low as a calming strategy but it was no use – Eyes had a want on for vengeance.

'Long Fella ain't had none o' his lads reefed, Mr Mannion. Long Fella wanna know this ain't gonna play out pretty, like.'

Ol' Boy nodded his understanding. He leaned back with Eyes Cusack against the generator shed and together they looked out over the sighing

city.

‘There’s a Calm has held for a good stretch in Bohane,’ said Ol’ Boy.
‘Be a hoor if it went the road, like.’

‘I ain’t the one been wieldin’ a shkelp.’

‘Arra, you know it’s Hartnett has the Smoketown trade.’

‘Sweet Baba Jay pass down the rights, he did?’

Ol’ Boy raised his eyes.

‘Let’s not bring the Sweet Baba into things just yet,’ he said.

Eyes pushed off from the shed with a bitter little jolt of the shoulder blades and he turned to face Ol’ Boy square.

‘I wan’ word got to him and got to him flashy, y’hear?’

‘Go on.’

‘Wan’ word to him that I got the flatblocks stacked behind me. Got people in every circle. Got the MacNiece, the Kavanagh, the Heaney. Wan’ word got to him that reparations need makin’. An innocent lad reefed, like?’

‘Ah, Eyes, there ain’t gonna be no –’

‘Reparations, Mannion! S’my word, like. Tell him a fair shake o’ the Smoketown trade’d work for me.’

‘And what’s he gonna say to me, Eyes?’

‘Tell.’

‘He’s gonna say Eyes Cusack is sending aggravators into Smoketown by design. He’s makin’ a martyr for the uptown so as to get a hold o’ leverage, plain as. He’s gonna say you’re spoilin’ to smash the Calm.’

‘Gonna say all that, he is?’

He turned to go, Cusack. Made as though he had a royal hump on. Ol’ Boy tried again.

‘Eyes? Y’ain’t been asked to turn over no face, check? You just got to say your lad was rogue. That he was messin’ where he shouldn’t have been messin’.’

‘That’s a lad o’ me brud’s, Mannion. Me brud in bits an’ his missus all drooly an’ spooked off the hoss –’

‘Ah let it go, Eyes, would you? Let the Calm hold an’ we can all get on with our business.’

‘Get word to him that I’m willin’ to sit and talk a Smoketown divvy.’

‘A divvy I would very much doubt, Eyes.’

A hard jab of a forefinger from Cusack, then:

‘If he wanna keep the Trace under Hartnett colours? Wanna keep slurpin’ his oysters below in Tommie’s and keep playin’ footsie with his mad fuckin’ cross-eyed missus –’

‘Leave a man’s wife out of it.’

‘He wanna keep suckin’ the wind? Then he’ll sit an’ he’ll talk a fuckin’ divvy on fuckin’ Smoketown!’

Ol’ Boy shut his eyes – the worst of it was when they got brave.

‘So you want me to go down to the ’bino with an out-and-out threat, like?’

A smile from Eyes Cusack the likes of which you wouldn’t get off a stoat in a ditch.

‘Tell him I got the flatblocks stacked.’

‘Don’t do this, Eyes.’

‘Fella gets back what he gives out, Ol’ Boy.’

‘That’s said, yes.’

‘An’ maybe he got old stuff comin’ back ’n’ all, y’sketchin’? Hear tell of a certain man pass this way in the bleaky hour ...’

‘This mornin’ gone?’

‘Same one. A man what hop an El for the downtown.’

‘Who are we talkin’ about, Eyes?’

‘That’s a man the Long Fella wanna watch ’n’ all.’

‘I said who’re we talkin’ about, Eyes?’

‘Long Fella know him well enough. His missus know him ’n’ all.’

Ol’ Boy raised softly a palm in warning.

‘Plenty o’ folk have thought before Hartnett was weakening. Same folk feedin’ maggots down the boneyard now.’

‘Just get the word out for me, Mannion.’

He nodded, and he let Cusack move along. He watched the old scut hoick a gobber and tug the trackies from the crack of his arse. Shook his head, Ol’ Boy – they had no fucking class up on the Northside Rises.

A winter’s bother was brewing then. Blood would flow and soon. But there was the possibility, Ol’ Boy realised, that too long and persistent a Calm might be no good for the city.

A place should never for too long go against its nature.