

# The Roaring Boy

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*Tom Cody*

**SETTING:**

All action takes place in living room of Dan Ryan's apartment

**TIME:**

The present

**CHARACTERS:**

DAN RYAN: retired phone company worker, in his sixties

DAN RYAN: as a young man

HELEN RYAN: waitress, Dan's second wife

FITZ: bar owner, in his sixties

VOICE: Dan's mother

VOICE: Brendon Sheridan, in his twenties

KATE: in her twenties, Dan's first wife

HERMAN: in his forties, Kate's father

BERTHA: in her forties, Kate's mother

VOICE: Jerry, sanitation worker

AT RISE:

*Living room of a middle class apartment in New York City. The furniture--chairs, tables, couch, small bookcase, a full-length mirror--is old, inexpensive. Helen Ryan, in her late fifties, and wearing a waitress uniform, enters from the kitchen. She is plump without being fat, her face is attractive but shows signs of hard living. She goes to the mirror, rubs her fingers under her eyes and down her cheeks, as if she can ease the signs of aging.*

*Dan Ryan, in his sixties, enters from the bedroom. He has on pants, a tattered sweater and slippers. He pauses, observing Helen and shaking his head.*

DAN: *(Speaks in gruff tones)* It won't help. Your only salvation is to follow the example of the lasses in Tralee, my dear home. A generous daily application of axel grease. There wasn't a lined face in all the town, women of eighty walking around with faces smooth as a baby's ass.

HELEN: *(Stops rubbing, turns around)* Fuck the lasses of Tralee, fuck you too.

DAN: Nothing like a cheery greeting to off-set a dreary, rainy morning.

HELEN: You don't deserve anything cheery. In Fitz's last night you didn't say a dozen words to me. Or to anybody else either. For the past two weeks you've been a fucking grouch. All the regulars in the bar are talking about you. Even Fitz, your best buddy, sees something's wrong. You, the biggest blarney bullshit artist of all time, sit like a zombie without a tongue. You're not interested in the horses of those goddamned stupid detective stories you're always reading. And you're not interested in your favorite pastime, fucking. No matter what I do for you, your prick is like a string of spaghetti. Christ, the horney king of lechers, and he can't even give it to me once in a blue moon.

DAN: And I'm sure you've not gone without some substitute. That Greek who owns the greasy spoon you work in must be standing behind you in your time of supposed distress.

HELEN: Don't get snotty now. No matter what problems we've had, I've never cheated on you. That's more than you can say for yourself.

DAN: *(Goes to table, picks up yellow sheet of paper from waitress's pad and reads.)* Take laundry to laundrymat. Don't forget to pick it up. Talk to the super about moving upstairs when the Whites move out next month.

(*Crumbles paper, drops it on table*) And what's wrong with this apartment? It's served me well over the years. Is it because I lived here with my dear departed Kate?

HELEN: Shit, I wouldn't care if you lived here with the Queen of England. It's the goddamned traffic, every time a truck passes I think it's about to smash through the window.

DAN: Kate never had any trouble with the traffic.

HELEN: She didn't have time to worry about traffic, she was too busy trying to tame you and putting up with your shit.

DAN: There was never a cross word spoken between us.

HELEN: Because she couldn't understand what you were saying. You're bad enough now, I can imagine what you sounded like when you got off the boat, talking with a mouthful of shit.

DAN: By the holy Jesus! It's the elocution teacher herself, spouting off on the speech of her betters. (*Mimicking voice*) Dan, he *don't* mean it, she's *mischievous* Dan, I know I *brung* it home with me, Dan.

HELEN: You old bastard, it's bad enough I have to take that shit from your two snotty kids, I don't have to take it from you too.

DAN: Leave Mary and Father John be, they're no bother to you. Once I took you for my wife instead of my paramour, they accepted you into the family.

HELEN: You son-of-a-bitch! I told you a million times not to be using those big words with me. Paramour, Scharamour. Acting like a goddamned highbrow because your two snots went to college. Anyway I graduated high school. How far did *you* get in school?

DAN: Far enough to know I couldn't benefit from any more schooling. In addition to which I had to support my dear old windowed mother, may the Lord have mercy on her soul.

HELEN: She needed the Lord's mercy, having you for a son.

DAN: A vicious lie. I was a fine lad, the best in all of Tralee. For miles around I was the topic of conversation. Did you hear, they'd say at the dinner table,

what young Daniel Ryan did today? Up before the sun he was, ploughing the fields, and working right through till sundown with never a stop for food and only a few swallows of water to see him through the parched day. A remarkable lad, they all agreed. And they were right, I set the whole town agog, a stripling of ten tender summers and doing the work of three grown men.

HELEN: They talked about you when you were ten because you were out fucking their daughters. How old were you when you got your first lay?

DAN: I lost my virtue to the most desirable colleen in town when I was a mere seven years old. I remember the occasion well, it was the night before I made my first holy communion.

HELEN: You may have been seven, but the thing you got into went baa, baa, baa.

DAN: Another vicious lie. But tell me about yourself, were you out of the crib when it first happened?

HELEN: I was twelve and my father's best friend sent me to the store to get him a newspaper. He told me when I got back to his apartment he'd have something nice waiting for me. I was expecting at least a dime, but instead he gave me his big cock and almost killed me.

DAN: Your father obviously had loyal and devoted friends. Did you tell?

HELEN: Hell, no. It just would have started trouble. Besides once I got over the shock I decided I liked it.

DAN: Let's see now, you started at twelve and you've been at it with abandon for fifty years. An enviable record.

HELEN: Don't you ever get tired of trying that age bit on me? I'm fifty-five, eleven glorious years younger than you. You've seen my birth certificate and other papers, you old fucking wreck.

DAN: While sitting on my personal bench in the park yesterday I was reading an article, very interesting, about forged documents, birth certificates and the like. It seems they're readily available for those who want to chop a dozen years or so off their age.

HELEN: (*Starts to put on coat*) Dan, listen to me and listen good. I married you for two reasons, you were fun to be with and you liked fucking just as much as I did, and still do. I don't know what started you on this gloom shit, but I know I don't want to live with it. I've lived with enough grouches in my life, I'm done with that. But I'm not done with sex, and I need it. I'd like to get it from you, but if you're not able to perform, I'll get it from someone else.

(*Goes to door, stops for a final word*) I'm leaving now to serve crummy bastards their bacon and eggs, and to laugh at their crummy jokes so they'll leave decent tips. When I stop in Fitz's after work I want you to be your old self, your old horny self. I want things to be like they were before this shit fell on you. Enjoy your day while I'm slaving away.

(*She sticks her tongue out as far as she can, running it around in circles, and then she leaves.*)

DAN: (*Walks to window, looks out, shakes head in disgust*) For once the baggage is right. A festering gloom hanging over me, a shroud shutting off life. They're all talking about me, even Fitz. And are they right? Coming near the end? Has that old devil concupiscence finally deserted me? First time in memory I haven't had the horny feelings, beautiful legs and mouth-watering tits pass by without causing a stir in my miserable body. I've become the poet's paltry thing. And what was it with Fitz when I entered from my daily constitutional yesterday?

(*Door opens, Fitz, in his sixties, and wearing bar apron, enters. He carries bar rag and a book. He goes to table, wiping it off, as if it were a bar. He looks up at Dan.*)

FITZ: I've been waiting for you, you're later than usual. Were you caught up in some adventure?

DAN: The adventure of sitting on my bench, watching boats pass up the river, wishing I had the stamina to jump into the water, swim out to a boat, and tell the captain to take me away, no matter what his destination.

FITZ: You'd be missed. (*Holds out book*) I finished it last night. And Jesus, but that Franklin Clarke was a bad one. When did you know he was the murderer, Dan?

DAN: I don't remember. It's been a few weeks, and my mind's drawn a blank.

FITZ: Dan, your mind is too keen to be drawing blanks. It's the lack of interest, you have none, haven't had in weeks. (*Leans close to Dan*) You sit here, a pale

imitation of yourself, sour as vinegar. You haven't had a good drunk on in ages, you don't come bursting through the door after your walk to compare notes on our detectives, mainly Hercule Poirot. Good looking women pass by with no comment from you. You sit there like a statue, you don't run out when an extra good-looking woman passes, telling her one of your stories, grabbing her arm and leading her in here for a drink.

DAN: Fitz, would we have been better off if we'd never come to this bewildering country?

FITZ: Dan, we'd have spent our lives doing backbreaking labor, making barely enough for an occasional pint. Ah, you're still in the mood, there's little sense talking to you. *(Takes bar rag and book and heads for the door. Just as he's about to leave, Dan calls to him.)*

DAN: Fitz, wait, don't go, don't leave it like this. I want things like they were before the dark spirits visited. A month back, I was my old self and life was a glorious challenge. Let us play back that glad time.

*(Fitz stops, shakes his head, and returns to the table-bar.)*

FITZ: I've been waiting for you. And how was your weekend stay up in Westchester with your daughter, Mary, and family?

DAN: Duty visits should be abolished. People fuss over you like you were in grave need of a keeper. But believe it or not, Fitz, a glorious discovery was unearthed this past weekend.

FITZ: And what discovery would that be? Westchester has nothing of note except snooty ladies. Your daughter is excepted from that remark, of course.

DAN: No need to except Mary. She's been known to take a few tumbles from walking with her nose pointed to the heavens.

FITZ: The discovery?

DAN: A name, Fitz, a name.

FITZ: What name?

DAN: Sherlock Holmes.

FITZ: Sherlock Holmes, the limey detective?

DAN: The one and the same.

FITZ: What about him?

DAN: An absolute wizard, a marvel, the unparalleled champion of deduction, even though he is English.

FITZ: And how did you come across him?

DAN: I fell into a conversation with my young grandson, Paulie, about books and such. He politely invited me to look over the shelf of books in his bedroom. Knowing of my interest in detectives he handed me a book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He assured me it was a whiz read, and I'd like Sherlock Holmes. That night, Saturday it was, I'm sitting by myself, everyone having gone off to bed, which seems to be a law in Westchester, everyone in bed by ten. I've also finished the miserly quota of beer the tyrant Mary sets aside for me. So just for something to fill in the solitary hours before it's time to retire, I delve into Mr. Holmes and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. A revelation, Fitz, an absolutely stunning find.

FITZ: I thought those Sherlock Holmes stories were for kids.

DAN: A great fallacy, Fitz. These clever and masterly tales should be kept out of the hands of callow youth. Librarians should place them on top shelves, much like you put the choice bottles on the top shelf, keep them out of the clutches of the young.

FITZ: Is he as good as Hercule Poirot?

DAN: Hercule had to take lessons from Sherlock. All that clever reasoning we so admire in Hercule is child's play for Sherlock.

FITZ: Then I'll have to read him and we can discuss him the way we do with Hercule. Speaking of which I've just finished *Cards on the Table*. Hercule was his usual self, a quick solution to the case.

DAN: As well he should have solved it quickly, there were a mere four suspects.

FITZ: Yes, but I didn't like the story as much as all the others we've read. That damn card game, bridge. How could people waste time on that stupid game?

DAN: True, Fitz, but look at the positive side. Bridge is a card game for the wealthy classes, and while they're occupied in the silly but harmless pursuit they have less time to oppress the working class.

FITZ: By God, Dan, you're always thinking. You see things I'm blind to.

DAN: An activity that costs nothing, in addition to lending a certain confidence to life. As to seeing things what did you think of Hercule's high jinks with Mrs. Luxmore in *Cards on the Table*?

FITZ: Mrs. Luxmore, the one involved with that Major Despard?

DAN: A tall, handsome woman. The opportunity was there, Hercule was alone with her, a maid was easily disposed of.

FITZ: Ah, Dan, now you're seeing things that weren't in the book.

DAN: Damn it, Fitz, between the lines, all there plain as day.

FITZ: Why would he get involved with that one? She had no use for the husband, and she was always playing up to Major Despard.

DAN: Fitz, although Hercule claims to be Belgian, I've long held the notion that he's a Frenchman. I picture him prowling the streets of London, Paris, Cairo, on the lookout for some buxom woman to sniff underarm hair and kiss sweaty thighs.

FITZ: Frenchmen do those things?

DAN: With a passion. Not everyone, but more than one could count. And realize, Fitz, I mean no disrespect for our hero, Hercule. I continue to admire his ability to pick up the scent of the criminal as well as that enchanting scent thrown off by an eager wench.

FITZ: Belgian, French, whatever. Dan, there's a thing I've been mulling over for some time now. (*Looks around to be sure no one is listening, then leans over towards Dan*) Why are there no famous Irish detectives?



DAN: An interesting question, Fitz. No, there are no famous Irish detectives, but the important item is the reason. It's because there's so little crime in Ireland that a detective couldn't make a decent living. He'd be forced to work part time as a solicitor or perhaps a bookmaker.

FITZ: (*Hand on chin, thinking*) But Dan, why couldn't he go to another country to practice his trade? Hercule Poirot is Belgian and he solves cases in every country except Belgium. (*In almost a whisper*) Dan, we do have the brains, don't we?

DAN: (*Waves off the question*) Our heads are fairly bursting with gray matter, but crime and misdeeds hold no interest to the Irish mind that's tuned to the song of the birds and the wind whispering through trees and the lovely sound of a tap dispensing cold frothy beer. Fitz, it's not the logic of things but the magic of things that hold our attention. (*He looks towards the window*) And by jumping Jesus, that holds my attention.

(*He rushes to the window, points out*) Did you see that, Fitz? More beauty than should be allowed in one body. Should I run after her, comment on the beauty and start a situation fraught with infinite possibilities?

(*Looks at watch, shakes head and returns to the bar-table*) More's the pity but the she-devil has been on the warpath of late and there's little reason to set her off. Her waitresses' pad, Fitz, it's a diabolical instrument. Before she's off to work in the morning she leaves messages, chores for me to perform, go to the store and such. And then there are comments on my behavior, I was too friendly to Betty Moran, our next door neighbor. All because I helped the dear girl with her groceries. And I swear on my mother's grave I barely touched the dear girl, an accidental brush against a splendid pair of tits that were struggling to be loose of the tight blouse she was wearing.

There are always comments on my drinking, which is certainly the height of nonsense. She makes me seem like a member of the Pioneers the way she laps up the sauce. Not one, Fitz, but two hollow legs, and if you doubt that, when she makes her appearance later I'll hold high one of the legs. You'll clearly hear the liquid swilling around, gurgling like the waters of the Liffey on a stormy day.

FITZ: It's a sound I'm not anxious to hear.

DAN: Ah, you're right, Fitz, the woman is a menace, but she does stir the blood, and of course, having the blood stirred is one of life's necessities.

FITZ: When I go home to Bridget at night she stirs my blood.

DAN: But how often?

FITZ: I get sufficient stirring.

DAN: Nightly?

FITZ: By God, I'm not you, Dan. I'd be dead and in my grave.

DAN: Weekly?

FITZ: If it was weekly it would have to be very *weakly*.

DAN: Monthly? And that's as high as I'm going.

FITZ: You're coming close and let us leave it at that. Now I have to serve my other customers or I won't be making enough to pay the other head.

*(Fitz walks out the door. Dan goes to window, looks out for a few seconds, then walks around the room.)*

DAN: Yes, a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick. And you wrote the truth, you scribbler of our lore. *(Suddenly bangs table)* But damn and damnation, I'm not part of your truth. Until a short while ago I was a roaring boy, out for mischief and the pleasures of debauchery. And what brought on the fearful change? Think, man, think. Hercule, Sherlock, let us put our heads together and sort out this damn mystery. Let us examine everything carefully, go back and pin down a time. Two, three weeks? That's about it, and what irregular event took place that hurled me into this dungeon? Up each morning, going about my business in orderly fashion, taking my walks. The walks. Anything out of the ordinary there? Can't recall anything of note, no terrible accidents or misfortunes witnessed, no unusual meetings, no sexual encounters either, more's the pity. After the constitutional stopping in for the morning chat with Fitz, discussing the horses for the day and our readings. No strangers in the bar causing trouble. Nothing, nothing, but there has to be. Something's been overlooked, the only possible explanation. Since life has moved along in its accustomed course, it must be some outside force. The weather? An outside force and conditions have been decent the past couple of weeks. A couple of rain showers and that one fierce storm with its pelting rain that kept me at home and from my walk. Moping around the house and what did I do? Going through the closets and, by holy Jesus, the suitcase. Taking it down from the closet shelf, unstrapping and there staring at me in four bundles, the letters,

letters back and forth. Mine to the dear sainted mother and friends left behind. The replies, a litany of sadness and death mixed with grand dreams and dashed hopes. Alongside the letters, documents, cards, a few fading photos, mute evidence a handful of people intermingled.

*(Almost shouting in his exuberance)* Yes, and by all that's holy that's what set me off and brought me to this sorry state. By Christ, Sherlock and Hercule, stand behind me, I'm a worthy companion and a bit more. And Fitz was complaining about the lack of Irish sleuths. The complaint is now rendered meaningless, and I'll inform him when I make my appearance. Yes, I remember every movement, going to the closet with no plan in mind, taking down the suitcase as a matter of curiosity.

*(He goes to closet, takes out the suitcase, puts it on table. Undoes frayed straps and stares at the contents. Takes out four bundles of letters and places them on the table. He picks up two bundles)* Copies of my letters, the mother pile and the rogue pile. Youthful conceit leading me to believe my sparkling and solemn and blasphemous reflections might be worth preserving.

*(He takes a letter from the mother pile)* The first letter home to the sainted one. The day after my arrival and suffering a fearful morning-after. Settling down to write the least of my desires, but a mother's love has more weight than a pounding head.

*(As he holds letter we hear his voice)* Dearest Mother. Arrived safe yesterday and so overjoyed to depart the rickety boat that I was sorely tempted to kiss the ground even though it wasn't the good green sod of home. Michael was there to greet me, and I was so happy to see a friendly face that I was tempted to kiss him too. Fortunately, I restrained myself from kissing the ground or Michael. Mother, you wouldn't believe how grand this country is, and religious too, which was a great surprise to me, having heard many unfriendly stories about the loose morals of Americans. But I can honestly report the stories are bald lies, and the inhabitants are decent, clean living people. The first thing we did after we arrived at the apartment, a lovely four room place with more appliances than they can have in Buckingham Palace, was to run off to church. St. Joseph's it's called, and while not an Irish saint, a worthy one nonetheless. I got down on my knees, thanking the good St. Christopher for safely hauling my carcass across the seething waters, and then I had a chance to look around. Well, so many people were in attendance I whispered to Michael that I must have lost track of the days while I was on the boat because with so many people in church it had to be a Sunday. But no, Michael assured me, it was an ordinary Tuesday and the church was filled like that every day.

*(The voice stops and Dan shakes his head and returns the letter to the pile.)*

DAN: God forgive me for being such a barefaced liar, but lending comfort to the elderly and worried should count as a corporal work of mercy. The worry lines on the brow and a legion of prayers for the errant son seeking his fortune in the land of opportunity.

*(Takes a letter from the second pile)* The first rogue letter, to Brendon Sheridan, chums since our diaper days. Urging him to come across with me, but the always cautious Brendon had no heart for the unknown.

*(As he reads letter we hear his voice)* Brendon, dear friend. I've been here a week now, and I've become so Americanized I've already had two baths. It's a seductive country, Brendon, but I'm more than willing to be seduced. Bars are open from eight in the morning till four at night, with no shutdown in the afternoon. The bars here outnumber the stars in the sky, and if you get thrown out of one, though it's almost impossible to do, you simply walk a few steps and you find yourself in another one and starting fresh. The police are quite friendly, and make nightly stops in the bar, having two drinks, with no money exchanged, while checking on the decorum of the patrons before taking the short walk to the next bar. Another enticing seduction, Brendon, the lazy man's mass. Starting at noon, it enables a thirsting soul to debauch on Saturday night and still arrive at mass on Sunday to pay homage to the good Lord. The most bewitching seduction, scores of gorgeous women, many dull-witted and tongue-tied on every subject except sex. Each takes pride in some exotic bed specialty, and each wearing a few inches of clothing and a ton of makeup. By God, each night when I drop down on my knees to say prayers I ask the good Lord to grant me one favor, have old Father Flynn take out of the pulpit in Tralee and transferred here to St. Joseph's, my parish church. The old buzzard would last for one mass, and when he took one look at the female congregation he'd go right through the ceiling of the church. He'd return to Tralee with material for one hundred and sixty sermons on the evils of modern dress and the general breakdown in morals of the young.

The following is for your eyes only, Brendon. My first day here the melancholy was on me, but cousin Mike, shrewd cousin Mike, had the proper remedy. Cora Jensen her name is, she's a regular in Fitz's, the bar where we do most of our drinking, and I must confess Cora made the melancholy disappear like a magician causing eggs and rabbits to vanish. You know Brendon, comparing us to Americans, there are many points on which we Irish are clear winners, in the areas of intelligence and story telling, for instance. But in the all important area of sex Americans are so far ahead that we're living in the Neanderthal age. When it came time for me to perform with the salty Cora, I started to assume the missionary position, the way we in our ignorance have always assumed to be the proper way. But Cora, the dear girl, shoved me off, throwing me on the bed, and saying, "Hey, Dan, welcome to America." And then she proceeded to

show me the glories of America. It's difficult to recall the exact sequence of events, but I learned a great deal about directions, up down sideways front back crossways topsy turvy crossed intersected. By Jesus, I thought I'd come around the world on the boat that dropped me on these foreign shores, but Cora showed me how ignorant I was as she took me around the world without leaving the bed. Brendon, take my word for it, Irish girls are totally unschooled in sexual matters. But take heart, all is not lost, for a brilliant idea just struck me, and I'll mention it to the regulars in Fitz's tonight. We'll take up a collection and send Cora over to Tralee to give lessons to the colleens. We'll equip her with all the necessities on this end, a box of chalk, a ruler, some charts and an eraser, all to insure competent instruction. Your only task will be to hire a hall, preferably the church hall, and I guarantee that if the homegirls take their lessons seriously very few of the lads will be leaving for these shores.

But you should leave, dear friend, pack up before it's too late. A good job awaits you in the phone company, working alongside Mike and myself. After work, which doesn't require three ounces of sweat a day, we'll go out on the town. We'll make a formidable trio, swaggering up and down Eighty-sixth Street, the main thoroughfare in our area. Bars and taverns crowd both sides of the street, music blares out of every establishment, and an army of beautiful women sit at the tables eagerly waiting the Irish triad. After a night of drink and dance, we're off to our place for an exhibition of the satyrs and their concubines. Before your arrival we'll sound-proof the walls, an absolute necessity for I well remember your prodigious ability to bring smiles to faces of milkmaids. One Saturday night while sitting in O'Connor's pub, we heard a scream that was a mixture of pain and joy. None could identify it, but I knew that my chum Brendon was ensconced in some haystack at the end of town delivering a bit of pleasures to one of the town girls. And the next morning at mass I identified the pleased one by picking out the lass with the brightest smile as she lifted up her eyes to the heavens, no doubt giving thanks for the Saturday night indulgence.

*(Voice stops, Dan shakes head and takes a letter from third pile. As he looks at it we hear Brendon's voice)*

Dan, old friend. Are you sure I could get a decent job if I came out? I'm sure the phone company doesn't hire people off the street. You know I don't have training for anything special, unless they're turning that Eighty-sixth Street you wrote about into a cow pasture. Things are bad here, but at least I make enough to keep body and soul together. And to be honest, Dan, the thought of starting over, in a strange country with strange ways frightens me. I'm not like you, I never was. You always welcomed challenges, and with that sharp tongue of yours you've never been frightened of anything, you wouldn't step aside for the

devil himself. As for being ensconced in a haystack that happened to me one time, I was with you, and we were engaged in that deadly sin that was said to drive its practitioners insane. But even at that unholy time your brain was active as you thought of the words we could use in confession to make it seem less of a sin.

*(Voice stops, Dan returns letter and picks up mass card from the suitcase.)*

DAN: *(Reads from card)* May Jesus have mercy on the soul of Brendon Sheridan. *(Returns card to suitcase)* Ah, Brendon, you left us at 47, but if you'd come across another dozen years, perhaps a score, would have been yours. And I kept increasing the lures, wild nights of debauchery, light penance from lenient priests for mortal sins, and what I thought would prove the irresistible lure, the purple haired girl who worked in the phone company office. But you paid no heed to me, Brendon, and you've gone to your grave without ever fucking a purple haired woman.

*(Picks up fourth bundle of letters, puts it back into suitcase, but then takes it out again. Takes out letter and we hear his mother's voice)*

My Dearest Danny. My prayers were answered, my wonderful son is working for a big company. It's such a relief to know that your cousin Michael is there to help you get started. Your Aunt Agnes and myself talk every day about the both of you, and we read your letters over and over. I can't believe buildings are as tall as you say, I'd be afraid to walk the streets, sure that one of them would come tumbling down on me. And I thought for sure you were trying to be funny when you wrote about the restaurant where you put money in slots and food comes out on a plate. But I spoke to Mrs. Finnegan, who worked in America for many years, and she said it was no lie you were writing, and that those Automat restaurants are scattered all over New York City. I'm certain you spend a good part of your pay putting coins in the slots just to watch the food come popping out. I can't believe the phone company pays you all that money, but I don't want you sending me any of your hard earned salary. I'm managing nicely and my wants are few. I have a story to tell you about something I did that I probably should be ashamed of but I'm not. Last Sunday after mass I stopped Mrs. Kerrigan and Mrs. Hanratty, those two old gossips who used to tell terrible stories about you, and who predicted a bad end for you when you left for America. I bragged to them shamelessly about your good job and your wonderful life in America. Well, their mouths just dropped open, and for the first time in all the years I've known them, they were struck dumb, not a word to say. Oh, it was a tonic for me, and Agnes and myself have been laughing about it every day since it happened. Now that I've gotten so bold I'm planning

to get Father Flynn in a corner at the next church social, and sing your praises to him. I'll take a nip first to loosen my tongue, but I'm determined to do it. And when I'm done with heaping praise on you, I'll remind him of the many times he twisted your ear and the many times he told me there was no hope for you.

*(Dan returns letter to envelope, and as he opens other letters we hear his mother's voice)*

I hope you're not too lonely now that Michael is married and living out in that Queens place. Maybe it's time for you to think of marriage too. I'm sure there must be many Irish girls that you meet on your job or in church. You'd be a great catch and I know you'd make a wonderful husband and father.

I told you not to send your hard earning money to me. And what in the world would I do with a coat? The one I've been wearing these past years will outlast me.

Poor Agnes is gone, and I miss her every day. I keep expecting her to walk in the door for tea and a chat. I'm happy that you're there in America to lend comfort to Michael. Agnes was more happy than I've ever seen her when he wrote that he became a foreman with the phone company. To celebrate we had a couple of nips with our tea. I know your turn will come soon.

My heart is pounding like it wants to break through my body. The happiness that's on me is so powerful that I feel it must be a sin. My own dear son getting married. My hands are shaking so much I can hardly keep the pen on the paper, so forgive my mad ramblings. I wish I could meet your German wife-to-be, Kate. There must be some Irish in her family because Kate is more an Irish name than a German one. You have a distant cousin named Kate, on my side of the family. I saw her years ago, a beautiful girl, but I'm sure not as beautiful as your Kate.

*(Voice fades, Dan returns letter to envelope)*

DAN: Kate, Kate. German and Irish, a curious combination for the times. But highly rewarding. The father, old Herman, stopping at Fitz's every Friday after finishing the week's work at Ruppert's brewery up on Third Avenue. Allowed one hour, then rushing around the corner to a wife and daughter. Enjoying my stories and one magical Friday he enjoyed so much that his one hour allotment extended to three. Terrified the wife would kill him, I went to concoct a story to lessen punishment. Walking into the apartment, my life turned upside-down.

*(Dan walks out door, passing two women coming in, one in her forties, the younger in her twenties. The older woman goes to table, makes motions of preparing food while the*

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*younger busies herself in a corner. Door opens and Dan enters with a man in his forties, whom he supports with an arm around his waist. Dan is now in his twenties.)*

HERMAN: Mamma, this is Danny, my crazy Irisher friend, and there is a good reason why I am late. *(He pushes Dan forward)* Danny, tell Mamma why I am late.

*(Dan stares at daughter, fascinated, then addresses the mother)*

DAN: All my fault, Herman wanted to leave the bar hours ago, but I prevented him. Off the stool he was headed for the door, determined to rush home to his lovely wife and daughter, and seeing you two lovely ladies I well understand his anxiety to get home. I apologize for my gross behavior, grabbing innocent Herman, pushing him back onto the bar stool, keeping him a virtual prisoner while I spouted some gibberish. It was unforgivable on my part.

HERMAN: Mama, say hello to Danny, and do not yell at him for keeping me, he's a crazy Irisher.

BERTHA: *(Snorts)* Ha!

HERMAN: Danny, say hello to my Bertha, she is the best cook in all Yorkville.

DAN: Hello, Bertha, the best cook in Yorkville, and I'd wager, far beyond. When your name is mentioned in cooking circles I'm sure famous French chefs hide in fear of being compared to you.

BERTHA: *(Snorts again)* Ha!

HERMAN: Danny, say hello to my daughter. I think you cannot guess my daughter's name, you smart Irisher. Guess. *(Doesn't wait for Dan to answer)* Kate, her name is Kate. When Mama and me come to this country we hear Kate Smith sing "God Bless America." We buy the record and play it every night. And when our daughter is born we name her Kate.

DAN: Hello, Kate, and it's a lovely name, a stunning name. And from this moment on it's my favorite name, no other being even a close second.

*(Kate smiles and shakes her head)*

HERMAN: Mama, what is to eat?



BERTHA: You ask to have food. You get nothing to eat tonight, bed you get.

*(She moves him towards bedroom. Before the door closes he calls out)*

HERMAN: Good night, my good Irisher pal, and it is all right that you keep me out late.

DAN: I'm ashamed of myself, Kate.

KATE: Why, because you kept my father out late?

DAN: Not at all, that was a mere nothing. I'm deeply ashamed because I live two short blocks from here, and yet I've never laid eyes on you. I'm completely at fault, what can I do to make it up to you?

KATE: *(Laughs nervously)* My father is right; you are crazy.

DAN: Would you settle for crazy in love?

KATE: You don't know me. How can you say that?

DAN: Do you believe in miracles?

KATE: If it says so in the Bible.

DAN: Ah, yes, the Biblical miracles. Lazarus raised from the dead, healing the lame and the blind, water changed into wine, which until now I've always considered the greatest of all miracles. But now we have a non-Biblical miracle, Kate and Dan. The names go together beautifully, don't they?

KATE: You're so crazy you frighten me a little.

DAN: You're never to be frightened of me, Kate. Are you going with anyone?

KATE: That's none of your business.

DAN: But of course it's my business. If you are going with anyone, I want to give you enough time to let the boy down gently.

*(Bertha returns from bedroom, sees Dan is still present and snorts).*

BERTHA: Papa is sleeping now. You can go, Mr. Irisher. You have done enough for one night.

DAN: Perhaps I should stay a while, just in case Herman meets with an accident, falling out of bed, for instance.

BERTHA: We can take care of Papa. Are you Catholic? We are Catholic.

DAN: Devoutly so, I break few commandments and attend church every Sunday.

BERTHA: We go to eight o'clock mass.

DAN: Certainly the best of masses. But in my case I have a bit of a problem. I work for the phone company, a good, steady, dependable job, but the work is exhausting, and by the time Sunday rolls around it's only my prodigious faith that moves me out of bed and into church in time for the last mass.

*(Bertha repeats snorting sound, and takes Dan by the arm and leads him to the door).*

DAN: Yes, I should be leaving, although reluctantly now that I'm aware of the two treasures that live here, a cook who puts all others to shame, and the loveliest girl my eyes have ever had the pleasure of gazing upon.

BERTHA: *(Tries pushing him out the door)* Goodnight, Mr. Irishman.

DAN: *(Resisting)* I'll leave now, but I look forward to that mouth-watering meal you'll soon invite me to, and Kate, I'll be seeing you at the eight o'clock mass this Sunday. I'll be there if I have to go without sleep, and after mass we'll discuss our impending marriage and other goodies.

*(Bertha's and Kate's mouths open in amazement, and Dan waves and leaves)*

BERTHA: You don't see that Irishman after church or any other time.

KATE: Oh, Mama, he wasn't serious, he was just being funny.

*(Bertha and Kate leave. Dan returns and goes to the table)*

DAN: And I did go without sleep. Prodigious prizes require prodigious effort. At the eight o'clock mass, squeezing into the pew behind them, and the lovely

smile telling me I was welcome. Our walk in Carl Schurz Park setting in motion our year's courtship, ending in our standing at the altar in St. Joe's. Twenty years that flew by like a quick breath until the devastating news.

*(Takes letter from mother's pile and we hear her voice)*

My Dearest Danny. This is one of the happiest days of my life. Your son, my grandson John, and I've just had a nip or two to celebrate what I've been praying for since the day you married. And it does my heart good that you're calling my grandson John, after your own father, and may the Lord have mercy on his poor tortured soul. My! Nine pounds, but I'm not really surprised because boy babies in our family have always been big. You were a big baby yourself, almost nine pounds too, and everybody in the hospital talked about the big Ryan baby. Oh, I'd love to hold young John in my arms, all nine pounds of him. It would do me more good than all the pills and medicines the doctors push on a body.

Lately I've been thinking a good bit about your father, just as I have been thinking of you, the two men in my life. Your father had a wayward spirit that made it impossible for him to find contentment. He couldn't find it here, in our small town, and he was forever having work problems. He was always pushing for better working conditions, better pay, shorter hours. He wasn't very popular with the bosses and owners, and after a short time on a job there'd be an argument and your father was out of a job. I think now that we married too young, we were barely twenty, and in those days most men didn't marry until well in their thirties and forties. All of his friends were off gallivanting in the pubs, and he was sitting here with me, restless and feeling trapped. He'd start to read one of his books but then the restlessness took over, and he'd put the book down and begin to pace the floor. Finally one night we sat down and talked it all out. And we decided he'd go off to Dublin to see what he could make of himself. He was so sure he'd be successful in a big city like Dublin, and we'd never have another worry. Once he got settled with a decent job and a place to live he'd send for us. You were two at the time, and you put up a big fuss when your father left. We waited for his call, but whatever it was he was searching for wasn't there in Dublin. After a year he came home, a discouraged and embittered man. He had only five years left to him, and harsh, grinding years they were. He worked part time in different jobs, but none of them lasted long. Then he stopped attending mass because he'd taken it into his head that the priests were using influence to keep him from jobs. I'm not very smart but I believe there are some men, your father was one of them, who are possessed by an uneasy spirit that is forever at them, driving them towards goals that are forever beyond their grasp, and causing them to be unhappy with the ordinary

things of life. But I want you to remember one thing about your father, he was a good man, there wasn't a better man in this whole town when he wasn't suffering the uneasy spirit. That's the picture I'd like you to have of your father, and it should comfort you to know that the end he let me call the priest. I pray that his soul has finally found peace in heaven.

Merciful God! This is the longest letter I've ever written, and I'm afraid I'm rambling on like some old biddy. Kiss dear John for me, whisper in his ear that it's from his proud grandmother. Oh, you and Kate must be the proudest parents in the world, just as I'm the proudest grandparent.

*(Voice fades, Dan returns letter to envelope. Holds up last letter in pile)*

DAN: One final letter to be gotten through. *(Takes letter halfway out of envelope, then pushes it back. Stares at envelope, deciding if he should read letter)* Ah, Jesus, there's no escaping. *(Takes letter out of envelope)* Pinched handwriting, the once beautiful penmanship turned into a child's scrawl.

MOTHER'S VOICE: My Dearest Danny. It's been ages since I've written. I'm sorry about that, but I was out of sorts for a while. The young doctor, the one who took over after Dr. Feeney passed away, made me stay in bed. A young surly thing he is, and when I told him I couldn't be wasting my days in bed he said if I didn't he'd put me in the hospital. No manners at all, he may know a thing or two that Dr. Feeney didn't, but he'll never know how to provide comfort the way Dr. Feeney did. But I'm out of bed now and back to my chores, with only a few stops to rest these weary bones.

I'm sitting here in the kitchen by the window, looking down the road, the way I used to do waiting for you to come skipping along. I don't ever remember you walking, it was always a skip, hop and a jump, like you were in such a hurry to get home. But when you did come home it was barely time enough for a bite to eat, and then you were off again. I'd ask where you were going, and you always gave the same answer, you were off to do God's work. And then you'd undo my apron strings without me knowing it, and as soon as you were outside I'd hear your ringing laughter, knowing my apron would fall off the minute I got up from my chair and started taking up my chores again. Oh, I close my eyes and I see you, the impish look on your face, mischief sparkling from out your blue eyes, the unruly hair falling down your brow. You were a good looking youngster, and your Aunt Agnes and myself had friendly arguments who was the handsomest, you or your cousin Michael. But looks aside, I must say you did give me fits each day. I'd be wondering what kind of devilry has he gotten into. But it was never a mean kind of mischief that you did, teasing the girls was your favorite trick, and a body couldn't stay mad at you because you had the saving grace of a bright smile and a clever word.

Now I must tell you something but I hope you won't think your old mother has gone daft. Yesterday afternoon I was sitting here in my rocking chair, and I must have dozed off, and I woke to what I thought was a miracle. Glancing down the road I saw a boy come bounding along, and maybe I wasn't fully awake because I could have sworn it was you. My mouth dropped open, and I jumped out of my chair, my heart beating like a drum. I threw open the door, ready to catch you in my arms. Then just as I was about to call your name I saw it was the Timmons boy, passing by on some errand. Oh, I want to tell you it gave me a start and I had to take a wee drop to steady my trembling body. I suppose it's a sign old age is fast creeping up on me, or maybe it's just that I miss you so much. And of course that goes for Kate and John and Mary. Each day I sit here, looking at all the photographs you've sent over the years. The grand Ryan family, and my dear son is the grandest of all. I hope you're able to read this letter, my handwriting has gotten so terrible. And to think that one year in school I won a pin for having the most beautiful handwriting in the class. Well, beautiful handwriting is gone now, like so many other things, and the shame is that life passes so quickly a person hardly has time to enjoy it. When I started this letter the sun was blazing in the sky, but now the sun has gone down, it's cloudy and I've turned on the lamp. My old eyes are weary so I'll have to close this wandering letter. I love you with all my heart, and no other mother could be blessed with a finer son.

DAN: (*Drops letter in suitcase without putting it back into envelope*) Ah, sweet Jesus, I've opened a can of worms, and I'll pay for the rash act.

(*Puts straps on suitcase and returns it to closet*) Out, Daniel, away from the unsettling deed. Brave the rain, a hurricane if need be. Away from Fitz's, no familiarity this maudlin day. A strange bar on Third or Lexington, where sullenness is allowed, and I'll be the most sullen.

(*Goes out door. A short pause and he returns*) Yes, that's just the way it was on that foul day with the storm raging and me wondering how to spend the morning. Letters and memories plunging me to the depths. Now that I've found the cause some action must be taken. Ignore the suitcase and it's baneful contents? No, I've been doing that unawares these past weeks with calamitous results. Letters lying in wait, and each time I pass the closet they'll speak to me, pressing down like a huge stone.

(*He walks past the closet, looking up, deciding on a course of action. He does to the small bookcase, picks up two books*) Ah, Hercule, Sherlock, what course would you follow? Some action must be taken.

(*Returns books, walks past closet and then to table*) What's to be done stands out like a beacon light, cruel though it might seem to the uninformed. No, it's not a

sacrilege to the memory of my dear mother and friends, a necessity to continue life in my rapscaillon fashion.

*(Goes to closet, takes suitcase, puts it on table.)* I'll dispose of it, but mother and friends, you'll never be forgotten. And dear mother, wonderful mother of mine, you'll always have that special place in my heart, and I'll sing your praises on high whenever it's story time in Fitz's and the regulars trot out their favorite mother stories.

*(Pats suitcase as in farewell, goes into bedroom, returns almost immediately with socks, shoes and a jacket. He puts on clothes.)* And by Jesus, it'll be a merry time in Fitz's. I'll walk in glowing like a man who's just had a death sentence reprieved. There'll be friendly bantering and no doubt requests for one of my tunes. Yes, lads, you've been denied my glorious voice for a time but Daniel Aloysius Ryan has returned, and what is it you'll have? "The Shithouse Rag" and as that old saw goes, there is no accounting for tastes. I'd much rather render something of a religious nature, say "Gaudeamus Igitur," but if it's low you want, low you'll get.

*(Places both hands on the table, bends down almost to floor, then slowly comes up, his hands moving up the back of his legs as he says the words in a voice between singing and talking)* Sam! Sam! The Shithouse Man! /Superintendent of the crappery can. / Picks up the papers, / Folds up the towels, / Listens to the music of / The movement of the bowels. / Flip! Flop! / Hear them drop! / Whoops!--That's the Shithouse Rag!

*(Takes a bow)* Yes, music lovers, hold the applause and have Fitz fill up the empty glass. Yes, money.

*(Takes out some bills from coat pocket, counts, shakes his head)* Not nearly enough on this day of liberation.

*(Looks at the bookcase)* The hidden Franklin! Stashed from the prying she-devil. Ferreting out my bankbooks, insurance policies. Putting the hundred away for emergency, and by all that's holy, it's emergency day.

*(Goes to bookcase, takes dictionary from case and puts it on top of suitcase.)* Yes, she'd look through my detective stories but she'd never open a dictionary. And Jesus, Dan, you should be a detective, you analyzed the enemy perfectly. Now, let's see, I used the fornicate page for easy memory.

*(Opens dictionary, takes out hundred dollar bill, kisses it)* Ah, yes, Ben, I know you're grateful for your release after so long in captivity. Clear of eye, determined chin, and above all, pure in heart. I don't care what stories are told about you being a rake. All dastardly lies, invented by jealous enemies who jumped to conclusions when you were seen shuttling between bedrooms of duchesses and scullerymaids. But of course mistakes were understandable, and Hercule Poirot himself would get lost in those oversized French chateaus.

*(Starts to return dictionary, but stops and opens it)* Fornicate was your page, Ben, and let's see what it says. Fornicate: to commit fornication. And sweet Jesus, as if that would tell a searcher of knowledge a blessed thing. Shillyshallying bastards, a simple fuck would have told it all and saved space in the bargain. And the world will never lack for ignoramuses, especially among the educated.

*(Returns dictionary to case and there is the chugging sound of a truck. He looks towards the window, then to the suitcase, as if making a decision. Runs to window)* Jerry, hold up a bit. I have something to add to your collection.

JERRY'S VOICE: O.K., Dan, but hurry it up. The fucking inspector is after our asses, he thinks we're goofing off too much, not picking up enough garbage.

DAN: Jerry, there's little appreciation for the working man in these callous times. If the bastard inspector comes by tell him it's a work of charity you're performing, and then dump the suspicious minded son-of-a-bitch into the back of your truck and let him be ground up in his beloved garbage.

*(Returns to the suitcase, pats it again)* Dear mother, dear friends, this is the necessity of life.

*(Picks up suitcase, goes to window, throws it out)*

JERRY'S VOICE: Christ, Dan! You must have brought this old piece of shit with you from Ireland.

DAN: That I did, Jerry, clutching onto it for dear life since it contained all my worldly possessions at the time.

JERRY'S VOICE: What the hell's in here, Dan, anything worthwhile?

DAN: Some distressing memories that are best rid of. *(Holds out the hundred dollar bill)* Jerry, when you and your helper take a break stop in at Fitz's. I'm putting this hundred dollar bill on the bar and it's staying there until whoever is in Fitz's and myself have drunk it up.

JERRY'S VOICE: Hey, what happened, Dan, is it your birthday or did you finally hit one of those parlays you're always playing?

DAN: Let's just say I've won back something.

JERRY'S VOICE: O.K., Dan, we'll speed up the collections, see you in an hour or so.

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DAN: I look forward to your arrival. (*Waves, sound of truck going on. He looks up at sky*) By Jesus, the sun's peeping through the clouds, a sign from on high telling me I'm on the right track. (*Starts to turn away from window, but then turns back*) By God, another sign, the beauty coming down the block, mammoth tits, gorgeous legs, and a face of rare grandeur.

(*Calls out window*) Darling, you should be in the movies. You're far more beautiful than the talentless frauds who are splashed naked on the screens these days. And a word of advice, you shouldn't be walking about without a body-guard, at least a bloodhound to ward off the lecherous louts who are allowed to walk the streets in this careless society.

(*He waves, turns away from window, looks down and feels his crotch*) Glory be to all the saints, the final sign of the restoration of Daniel Aloysius. Stirring like a ramrod, and the she-devil will sing no sad songs this gladsome and festive night.

(*Starts out the door but stops, goes to table, picks up crumpled paper and again reads the instructions*) Take laundry to laundrymat. Don't forget to pick it up. Talk to the super about moving upstairs when the Whites move out next month.

(*Crumpled paper again*) We're staying put, noise and all. If it's high up the restless wanton craves, I'll impale her with my eager tool, send her soaring to the ceiling, first warning her of the possible danger to her back. The clothes can stay dirty for one more day. My only complaint with this country, too much bathing and showering and dousing with ungodly scents that would embarrass a French whore.

(*Takes paper, throws it in air, then kicks it with back of his foot. Starts for door again, putting the hundred dollar bill in his pocket*) Come. Ben, a number of dreary days to atone for, and by Jesus, it's grand to be alive and kicking and to be a roaring boy again.

(*Does a few dance steps out the door as CURTAIN FALLS*)