

Gallivanting

Deftly adjusting the squeaking, bouncing seat to oblige a tall, lanky frame, Seamus O'Shea buckles in, having freshly collected his busload from the science and technology museum. The hilarity of navigating the museum's crooked kitchen works its usual magic, infusing the passengers and atmosphere with bubbly chatter, emitted in clipped, enthusiastic streams.

Seamus drives one hundred yards and stops, oblivious to what awaits him.

"Right-O, kindly stay seated for a wee while and refrain from ogling one another," he says playfully. "I'll be back in a spot of time, you needn't worry a smidge."

The onlookers sit motionless, observing the driver swing the curved, metal arm, folding open the door. He rounds front, reaching into a small side window and pulls a lever, shutting the door. The weather is raging, a hard, slanted rain; pelting the outside glass in over-sized droplets, like chubby tears exploding across cherub cheeks. Six heads turn in unison as Seamus ambles into The Thirsty Scholar.

Ingeborg gets up, pulls the lever, opens the door, and exits with Rose. A third rises, Harold is his name and he nods to Sam; both are quick on Ingeborg's heels. The lemming parade smoothly and efficiently gives wing to imagination as Thomas and Kevin bring up the rear.

Blowing into the frothy suds, Seamus tilts his glass to create a fissure for the brown elixir to pass through foam. The bitter flavor is pleasing. He smacks his lips, looking at his watch, willing time to move slowly. "Yesiree, last run for today and I'm a free man," he comments.

"Seamus, you devil," says the barkeep. "You've been pulling this stunt for years."

"The loveliest gathering of gentle heartbeats you'd ever meet," notes Seamus. "And that science and nature stuff, does wonders for killing boredom once a month, mind you, I get a kick out of watching a cadre of cooks go crazy in the crooked kitchen, well, the irony tickles me to no end, the alliteration too," he says laughing heartily, as large, gulping swallows disappear into two hollow legs. "Course my desire for a second is intense, to be sure, but I can't indulge in good conscience and drive," he assures the barkeep.

The remnants of scattered footprints melt into wet earth as Seamus mindlessly starts up the engine, then glances in the rear mirror.

"Oh, no, no, no, this is no good. It'll be the end of me!"

The bus screeches to a halt. Seamus pulls a wheelie; rushing back inside, frantically inquiring to his trusted philosopher, "Have you seem 'em?"

"Who?" asks the barkeep.

"Them!"

"Them who?"

"The bleedn' patients, man! They've high-tailed it and escaped!"

He dashes out; no time for idle talk. Gone are bright eyes and staccato speech. He reasons aloud, "Right, if I was a wee bit tilted and running off course, where'd I go to?" Seamus scratches his head, contemplating where and how to round up six wandering souls. He presses heel to accelerator, moving the bus incrementally, driving behind the pub to check the back alley. Nothing.

The fear of retribution from higher ups is foremost in his mind as he imagines the horror of relaying the outrageous news. Libation is conducive to fluidity of thought. Sit and ponder the dilemma, then act, Seamus decides, retaking his seat, already warmed.

"That was a quick run."

"I'm doomed, old boy," says Seamus, reaching for a freshly poured pint.

"Been my experience," begins the barkeep, "that solutions to problems are often under our very noses."

"I doomed, I tell you," insists Seamus.

"Perhaps not entirely, my friend, I gather you've lost your busload of patients?"

"Aye that I have."

"To find one or all, I recommend thinking like one."

"Permanent residents of the Royal," explains Seamus. "A crying shame when a keen mind vacates the real world for the imaginary but there it is, I wouldn't know how to think like them even if I could."

"Those who make their bed each morning always have money in the bank," contends the barkeep.

"This mad lot never makes a bed, they have orderlies for that job," answers Seamus.

"Men have called me mad but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence, whether much that is glorious, whether all that is profound does not spring from disease of thought, from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect."

"A grand use of words...you're a credit to your profession...yours?"

"Only in my dreams," answers the barkeep. "Mr. Poe himself."

"Ah yes, a dark horse that Edgar, but a valid point you make, all madness has a tincture of genius."

Decisively moving, Ingeborg selects a pine chair in the back corner and pulls out a seat next for Rose. She unbuttons her wet coat, curling the shoulders onto the chair back, carefully smoothing out wrinkles to maintain the coat's shape. Rose mimics Ingeborg, arranging four additional places.

"My usual," states Ingeborg, in perfect diction; her clear eyes focused. "And pour a light beer for my lovely friend, Rose."

"The house lager for me, one for Sam and one each for Thomas and Kevin," says Harold. The round table of six are happily seated as Ingeborg whips out a five-dollar bill and hands it off to the waitress. Rose finally speaks, after indulging in a generous drink.

"We have to tell him," she categorically states to Ingeborg.

"I see no reason to deny one self the simple pleasure of a harmless nip," she answers.

"One day he's going to figure it out," says Harold.

"I agree," says Thomas, nodding his head.

Arms come together in center, stretching and extending long, clinking glass to glass to glass.

"Let us raise a drink in honor of Seamus, a man of unheralded kindness and generosity."

"Here! Here!"

The beads of sweat sparkle on Seamus' brow. He finishes a second and turns the empty glass upside down. The very thought of facing the inevitable fills him with dread. And for once in his life he is without a shred of guile to concoct a believable lie.

"The truth is a wily beast," says Seamus.

"The easiest lie to remember is the truth," counters the barkeep.

"Right, right, right, I've got to fess up, you're absolutely right," says Seamus. "I've quaffed back two full ones, need to settle my nerves, you see, that's what I'm facing, immediate dismissal, there won't be an ounce of forgiveness for this old boy. Twenty years of service down the drain."

The barkeep pats Seamus' shoulder, glancing overtop his head, watching the waitress punch the total into the register.

"Everyone dies a liar," says the barkeep, "But those who embrace truth before they go are truly free."

"Aye," says Seamus. "I suppose I have to face the music."

"No worries Seamus, everything generally works out for the better, even when we least expect it. I'll put today's drinks on your regular tab, settle up at year's end, at your convenience."

"You're a gentleman and a scholar, though the bill adds up like a surprise kick in the head but it's just as well, a man mustn't begrudge a few indulgences."

Time folds inside agonizing worry. Seamus forlornly buttons his coat, returning to his bus, parked in a sharp angle; a wheel edges curb. His head and shoulders slouch. Instinctively, he reaches into the window and pulls the lever, opens the door, then steps in behind the wheel. Six warm bodies, quiet, content as shut clams, sit opposite one another, filling the cavernous mode of transport with alive, human presence, the kind of presence embodied in alert minds and watchful eyes. Seamus double takes and stands up, staring at the group with an astonished look of joy.

"Ah, may you go straight to heaven! You didn't abandon me!"

Ingeborg and Rose smile. Harold and Sam snicker. Thomas and Kevin cover their mouths.

"We'll just keep this one to ourselves, shall we, no need to trouble the administrators with pesky details about where you've been off to gallivanting," says Seamus, feeling self-assured and complete, starting up the engine, whistling as he pulls onto the main road.

The barkeep wipes the counter, mentally adding the tally of two pints of bitter, five lagers, of which one is light and one shot of Apricot brandy.

"The hospital group was a lot slower today," notes the waitress.

"Yup," answers the barkeep. "Must be the rain...usually, they stand and guzzle before rushing out."

"Never known a man like Seamus, has a heart of gold."

"Indeed he does," says the barkeep. "Did the tall lady slip you the regular?"

"A fiver for letting them in the rear exit."

Seamus stops at a red light. The patients are serene; one is fast asleep. The sky is full of foreboding cirrostratus clouds, a cover of ominous darkness, behind which the sun hides. A loud belch resounds in the aisle and Seamus looks back at Ingeborg, who flushes crimson, her hair damp and disheveled.