

The Last Dance

by Stuart Neville

Treanor's Bar never tried too hard to be an Irish pub. Maybe that's why on a busy night you could find more Irish people there than any bar in the city. I don't mean white guys trying to adopt some kind of ethnicity to ease their Caucasian guilt, but real honest-to-God children of Eire.

Plenty of bars gave you the shamrock treatment, Guinness on tap and fiddles on the walls, but Treanor's was the real thing. It seethed with that self-righteous jingoism and sense of injustice that only comes from Ireland.

Do I sound bitter? Well, I have good reason to be. That's why I got out, got away, across the ocean from Belfast to Boston. I couldn't stand the hate anymore. But still, at least once a week, I felt drawn to this sorry excuse for a bar.

This one night, the place was empty save for an old duffer counting change on a tabletop, Mickey the barman, and one stranger who occupied a stool two seats down from my favourite spot. The stale smell of old beer filled my head. Mickey raised an eyebrow and grunted as I limped towards the bar. The weather had turned cold and damp, and my left knee didn't like it one bit.

I loosened the collar of my work shirt. The ID laminate clipped to the pocket proudly told the world I had achieved the office of Warehouse Manager. I wasn't quite a regular at Treanor's, not a part of the furniture, but Mickey didn't have to ask what I wanted. A pint of Smithwick's was ready for hoisting to my lips before my ass was even settled on the stool. I grimaced at the creaking in my knee.

"Quiet tonight," I said.

"Yep," said Mickey.

And that was the sum total of our conversation most nights. Tonight was different, though. Mickey leaned forward as he pretended to wipe down the bar. Mickey never wiped down the bar. The beer stains on there were older than my car, and it's a long time since that piece of shit was new.

Mickey inclined his head towards the stranger. "See that guy?" he whispered.

I tried hard not to look to my right where the stranger sat staring at a shot of whiskey and a pint of Guinness.

Mickey rested his chin on his hand, obscuring his mouth as if the stranger might be a deaf lip reader. I should point out that Mickey isn't the brightest. Between you and me, he knows just enough not to eat himself.

"That guy's been here a half hour," he said.

I shrugged. "And?"

"And he hasn't had a sip. He just sits staring at those glasses like they're gonna start doing tricks or something."

By now, the old duffer had finished tallying his wealth and he approached the bar. "I'm a little short, Mickey. Can you stand me the twenty cents?"

His accent, or what was left of it, sounded like Cork to me. I'd seen him here before, always alone. He probably came to America expecting to make his fortune. The sight of him terrified me. Not because he was a scary guy, you understand, but because he looked like my future. I shuddered and put my glass down.

Mickey sighed, pulled a glass from under the bar, and brought it to the tap.

“You’re always a little short, Frankie. Drink this one up and go home.”

Frankie smiled and reached for the glass full of froth. “Thanks, Mickey. You’re a good lad.”

He gave the stranger a sideways glance and shuffled back to his table. If the stranger noticed, he didn’t let on. He just sat there, staring at his drinks, his shoulders rising and falling with his breathing.

The patchy overhead lighting cast this man in glints and shadows, picking out the ridges and valleys of his face, making it look like a skeleton mask. His hands were spread flat on the bar, as if supplicating themselves to the drink, and their lines gave away his age. Mid forties, I’d say, about my age, maybe a year or two older.

Mickey leaned back in to me. “What’ll I do?” he asked.

“He’s paid for them, hasn’t he?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then what the fuck do you care? He can piss in them if he wants.”

Mickey’s face creased. “But he’s giving me the creeps. He’s not right. Look at him. Does he look right to you?”

“No,” I said, “but neither do most of your regulars.”

“I’m gonna ask him what’s wrong.” Mickey didn’t go anywhere. “Will I ask him? I’ll ask him. Should I ask him?”

“Jesus, Mickey, if it’ll calm you down, go and ask him.”

Mickey looked to the stranger, then back to me, then back to the stranger again. He straightened and moved along the bar.

“You all right, there?”

The stranger didn’t respond.

“Mister? Are you all right?”

“Mmm?” The stranger looked up.

“Is something wrong with the drinks?”

“No,” said the stranger.

“You haven’t touched them.”

“I don’t drink anymore.” The stranger’s eyes moved back to the glasses in front of him. His accent, hard and angular, made me study him a little closer. He was West Belfast, like me. My own accent had been buried beneath almost two decades of Boston living, but his was fresh.

A furrow appeared in Mickey’s brow and his tongue peeked out from between his teeth like he was figuring out his taxes in his head. “Then why’d you buy ‘em?”

“Because I could. Because I can drink them if I want,” said the stranger. “But I don’t want to. I don’t need to.”

“I’ll have them when you’re done, then,” I said. I am not a proud man.

The stranger turned towards my voice, the light shifting on his face. The skeleton mask slipped away and I saw him fully for the first time. He said something. I don’t know what, offering the drinks to me maybe, but I didn’t hear. My heart was thundering so loud it drowned everything else out. I had to fight to control my bladder. My left leg, my bad leg, throbbed with memory.

Sweet Jesus, I knew his face. Some nights, when sleep shunned me, there was nothing in the world but his face. Other nights, when sleep was more forgiving, it was his face that dragged me back to waking.

The stranger's lips moved some more, and now Mickey stared at me. Mickey said something too, but it sounded like blood rushing in my ears.

"I know you," I said.

Mickey looked back to the stranger, whose face had slackened.

"You're Gerry Fegan," I said.

"No," he said. He turned back to his drinks. "You've got me mixed up."

His fingertip traced a line through the beaded condensation on the glass of stout.

"You're Gerry Fegan from Belfast." I lowered myself from the stool and limped the few steps to where he sat. I pointed to my left kneecap. "You're Gerry Fegan and you did this to me."

He kept his eyes forward. "You've got me wrong."

Mickey's mouth hung open as he watched.

I grabbed Fegan's shoulder and he winced. "Look at me, you piece of shit. You smashed my kneecap. You and Eddie Coyle. You would've done the other one, only the cops came."

Fegan turned his face to me. It was cut from flint. "I don't know what you're talking about. You're thinking of someone else."

I moved tight to him, his shoulder pressing on my chest. "Do you remember me?"

"No. I don't know you."

"I'm Sean Duffy. You and Eddie Coyle dragged me into an alley behind McKenna's Bar on the Springfield Road because I bought the wrong girl a drink. Remember?"

"You've got the wrong fella."

"She was Martin McKenna's fiancée, but I didn't know that. We had a dance, that's all." I looked down at my leg as the pain flared in my knee, a keepsake from the bad times. "The last dance I ever had. McKenna found out about it and he had you and Coyle do me over. Do you remember, Gerry?"

Fegan reached up and took my hand from his shoulder. "It's not me."

He got off the stool and turned to the exit. I went after him, hopping and limping to catch him up.

"What was it, a crowbar?"

He kept walking. I reached into my pocket and found the plastic box cutter handle, the one I used at the warehouse. My thumb settled on the button.

"Whatever it was, it did the trick. I couldn't walk for a year. My father had to carry me to the toilet. You better stop, Gerry."

The box cutter came out of my pocket, the blade sliding out from the orange plastic handle with a stutter of tiny clicks. Fegan reached the door.

"Stop, you bastard."

He looked back over his shoulder and saw the blade in my hand.

"Easy, Sean," Mickey called from somewhere behind me.

Fegan turned his body to face me.

“So, what are you doing here?” I asked. “It was on the news last month. All the old crew, McKenna and McGinty, all that lot. There was a feud. Someone did them in. Is that it, Gerry? Did you run away in case whoever did them came after you? Did it all catch up to you?”

My hand trembled with adrenaline, my voice shook with hate and fear. I had dreamed of this, of taking from Gerry Fegan what he took from me.

“You didn’t run far enough,” I said.

Fegan took one step forward so the blade quivered beneath his chin. “No,” he said. “I can never run far enough.”

I felt Mickey’s lumbering presence over my shoulder. “Jesus, Sean, take it easy. Put the knife away.”

Fegan’s eyes locked on mine, cold and shiny and black as oil. No fear leaked from him. One movement of my wrist would open his throat, but the terror was all mine.

“He won’t do it,” he said. “He’s not like me.”

I brought the blade closer so it reflected light onto his skin. “I will. I’ll do it.”

“No, you won’t. You can’t.”

What started in my belly as a laugh came out of my mouth as a whimper. “Why not?”

“Because you’re better than me,” he said.

From the corner of my eye I saw Mickey sidle up to us, a baseball bat gripped in both hands. “Sean, put the knife away. Mister, whoever you are, just turn around and get the fuck out of here.”

I felt the tears, then, bubbling up from inside me. Stupid, helpless child’s tears. Hot, scalding tears. “But look what he did to me. Just for a dance. I danced with the wrong girl and look what he did to me.”

A memory moved behind Fegan’s eyes. “McKenna told me to do it. He never said why.”

“So?” The words hitched in my throat. My legs threatened to crumble beneath me. “If he’d told you why, would it have made any difference?”

Fegan didn’t think about it for long. “No,” he said.

My legs had trembled all they could, and now they betrayed me. Fegan caught the hand that held the box cutter and let my body fall into his. The knife left my fingers and Fegan’s arms snaked around me. His breath warmed my ear.

“Martin McKenna’s dead now,” he said. “Him and the others, they’re all gone. But it wasn’t a feud. They’ve all paid for what they did. I made sure of it. Everybody pays, sooner or later.”

“Not you,” I hissed. “You haven’t paid.”

“I will.” His arms tightened on me. “But not tonight.”

I had a second or two to wonder where the knife was as Fegan and I danced in the doorway of Treanor’s Bar.

He slipped it into my pocket and his lips brushed my ear as he said, “I’m sorry for what I did.”

Then he was gone.

Mickey’s thick arms took my weight as the door swung closed and the cool night air washed around me. He guided me back to the bar, towards my stool, but I veered to

the right, to where the shot of whiskey and pint of Guinness remained untouched. The black beer was still cold as my shaking hands brought it to my mouth.

Like I said, I am not a proud man.

Stuart Neville has been a musician, a composer, a teacher, a salesman, a film extra, a baker and a hand double for a well known Irish comedian, but is currently a partner in a successful multimedia design business in the wilds of Northern Ireland. His writing has appeared in online magazines such as Electric Spec and Every Day Fiction, as well as local press. His novel Followers, a dark thriller about a former Belfast killer haunted by his victims, is currently seeking a loving home. Visit his website at <http://www.stuartneville.com>.