

FOUR MEN

Terry Morgan

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FOUR MEN:

A satirical tale of four white, middle-aged men struggling with women and other frustrations of modern life and deciding that it's time to fight back.

Doctor A. Sinnick with his overbearing woman 'boss', Mrs Pettifer, is the only one with a proper job and money, but Sinnick can only stay sane by writing anonymous letters and poems to annoy those in authority and by talking to his imaginary friend, Freud, who sits at a control panel inside Sinnick's frontal lobe.

Quentin Kelp has just lost his seat as a Member of Parliament to a twenty-six-year-old Liberal and teacher of creative writing called Prudence Bottomley who wears a pony tail and beige cardigan. What on earth would such a woman know about running the country? But now Quentin is hurting and needs a new challenge.

Unemployed accountant **Charlie McTavish** is nothing like his rough Hell's Angel looks suggest. If proof was needed that Charlie is in far more need of assertiveness training than either of his two past wives then look no further than his current transport, an underpowered Honda moped and his home, a tiny, windowless room above a Chinese take-away.

And then there's **Paddy O'Brian**, the Irish owner of a struggling fish and chip shop whose wife Maeve took the Ryan Air flight back to Cork as soon as she caught her first whiff of hot chip oil and left Charlie to run the business alone with only his collection of Irish novels and poetry for company.

PART ONE:

Every man should be allowed his private secrets.

Paddy O'Brian's was to lie in the dark in his vest and boxers reading Irish poetry by torchlight.

That he found torchlight spooky was a hangover from his childhood though he could never admit it, even to Quentin, Sinnick or Charlie. But Paddy always looked forward to evenings when he could close his fish and chip shop and immerse himself in a world of leprechauns, smoky peat fires, dark Dublin tenements and pubs reeking of spilt Guinness. In his tiny flat above the shop,

though, the smell of hot oil and deep-fried fish was never far away. It wafted up from below and, however much he washed, it seemed to ooze from every pore of his body to remind him of disappointment and failure and his increasingly desperate need for a change in his life.

On that Sunday night, just as he'd pulled the blanket over his head and started on a book of poems by Seamus Heaney, someone threw a stone up at his window.

"*Holy Mary. Who the f.....?*" he said.

When he looked out there was no doubting who it was. Under the street light, stood Charlie McTavish looking for another small stone to throw. He opened the window. "Can't a man have a night off once in a while, Charlie?"

"Not if another man's feeling hungry and lonely, Paddy."

"You're tugging at my heart strings again, Charlie. You'd better come up and I'll cook you some fish fingers. But take those ridiculous boots off. They tear holes in my carpet."

Muttering '*Jesus wept*' under his breath, Paddy plodded downstairs in his underwear and unlocked the front door. Charlie looked at him, up and down. "All your clothes in the washing machine, Paddy?"

"Please, Charlie. Just do as I say and remove your boots."

"And why switch off your door bell?"

"For some peace and quiet, Charlie. I forgot your ingenuity."

Paddy waited as Charlie sat on the lower step to pull off his black boots, then followed him upstairs where he fell onto Paddy's sofa that had, minutes before, been the set for a dimly lit drama in an Irish grave yard. He lay back with his legs wide apart, clad in his tight black leather trousers with his arms outstretched across the back of the sofa. "Trying to save on your electricity bill, Paddy?"

Paddy turned his torch off, switched on the ceiling light and frowned at the sudden brightness and the relaxed, bearded vision before him. "It might help if you removed your dark glasses."

Charlie removed his tints and pulled a hand through his long grey beard. "Ah. Yes. That's better,"

Beneath the black, leather jacket was a bright yellow sweater and a tuft of curly grey hairs showed behind the collar of a crumpled red shirt. He'd obviously walked, though, because there was no sign of his crash helmet. He smiled through his thick beard. "Sorry. I didn't bring any wine, Paddy."

"So, what's that hanging from your pocket?"

“A list of buyers and sellers.”

Paddy had been trying to sell his business for months. “That’s very thoughtful, Charlie but do I really want it right now?”

Charlie looked downhearted. “I told you I’d sift through the list of clients I nicked before leaving Armstrong and Fiddler. Least you can do is glance at it.”

Charlie, out of work but an accountant by trade, was another who lived over a shop though in Charlie’s case it was not an accountant’s but Fook’s Wok, a Chinese take-away on the Midland Road. He pulled the sheaf of paper from his jacket pocket, leaned forward and spread it on the floor. “There. Neat, huh?”

Paddy knelt at Charlie’s feet and sniffed. “There’s a funny smell. Is it your socks or is it you?”

“All of me. Today it’s fried stuffed bean curd with stewed bamboo shoots.”

Paddy looked up. “Is that all you’ve eaten today?”

“And some left-over Szechuan chicken with black bean sauce at 7am.”

“Sounds delicious.”

Paddy grilled a pack of fish fingers, poured a small tin of baked beans over them and watched Charlie eat as he read through Charlie’s list. There was nothing that caught his eye but Charlie had, at least, tried.

But that’s how Paddy’s Sunday evening passed. Not alone with his torchlit poetry, but with Charlie who mostly wanted to share his thoughts on human rights from the perspective of a divorced, white, middle-aged man living in dire poverty as he tried to get his battered life back on track.

He departed around midnight. “Will you, Quentin and Sinnick be in the Red Lion tomorrow night, Paddy?”

“Sure thing, Charlie. Sleep well. Do you keep a packet of Rennies handy?”

Doctor Albert Sinnick’s secret was Freud. Apart from Quentin, Paddy and Charlie, Freud was the only friend Sinnick had.

That might have surprised the town’s senior citizens, especially the old ladies, who gossiped about Sinnick’s long-standing reliability, his sure touch and kind, sensitive words. To them he had always been the figurehead of the town’s health service. It may not, though, have surprised the rest of Krupton society.

To the younger members of the community he was a relic of a time long passed when a person’s human rights could be ignored. If they’d seen an image of another human with a perfect body on Snapchat or some other site and suddenly felt inadequate, vulnerable and suicidal then who the hell was that stupid old codger, Doctor Sinnick, at Krupton Health Centre to refuse their requests for

nips, tucks, breast implants and labiaplasty or for their outdated tattoos to be removed at the public's expense? And if Frankie Cartwright turned up saying he felt like being a woman again today why couldn't Sinnick certify him as of variable gender if he was arrested for wandering into the women's changing rooms at the sports centre?

To Mrs Pettifer, the clinic's office manager, on the other hand, Sinnick was just another staff member to be bossed around and taught the rights and wrongs of modern management.

Sinnick worried constantly about the ways things now were but what could he do? If he expressed an opinion, he was dismissed as an old-fashioned bore with no sense of how life had changed so for his own therapy he would write short, snappy poems and draft long, philosophical and political emails and letters just to get things off his chest. He rarely posted them of course because the writing itself was enough.

Freud liked his poetry, though. It was important to Sinnick that he pleased Freud. Freud found Sinnick's writings honest, philosophical and just about rude enough to make someone's blood boil. Which was, of course, the objective.

Freud understood him. So too, of course, did Paddy, Quentin and Charlie but Freud was the most understanding. Freud was honest, trustworthy and ever present. There was no need to phone or text Freud for he was always there, waiting to respond to Sinnick's moods and privy to his most intimate thoughts.

On that Sunday morning Freud had, as always, accompanied him like an obedient dog, not by traipsing behind, however, but riding high up in Sinnick's frontal lobe before a bank of computers that monitored his emotions and watched his life pass by on a screen that was Sinnick's retina.

Sinnick's pre-breakfast argument with Mrs. Sinnick meant he'd crept out and gone where he always went when trouble brewed on a Sunday: the clinic, where all was quiet and peaceful though a little chilly because, being Sunday, the heating was off. After a quick check that no-one else had also decided to use it as a refuge from domestic matters, Sinnick began on the exercises he'd recently started after realising how high his pulse rate and blood pressure had risen and how his calf and thigh muscles ached after chasing Mrs Sinnick's cat around the garden with a needle and syringe. (Mrs S had been out at the time but clinical trials on animals were no longer as easy to arrange as they once were so one was forced to use whatever was available).

Sinnick's exercise began by lying face down on the office floor by Mrs Pettifer's desk and trying a press up. He'd not managed one yet but he'd always been a determined sort. He was on his third attempt when, right on cue from somewhere inside his head, Freud spoke: "*How're you doing, mate?*"

No-one except Freud would have enquired about Albert's progress to add what he called '*a few abs to my flabs*' and '*size to my thighs*' without a hint of ridicule. Few would have referred to him as 'mate' either, but Freud's skill was in knowing exactly what to say and when. His timing was impeccable and Sinnick knew he wouldn't mind waiting a minute or so for a reply while he fought for air.

The gasping and pain from every part of Sinnick's body from the tip of his metatarsals to his longus capitis was understandable, after all this was only the third Sunday of pre-breakfast arguments and thus his exercises. The real concern was his heart. It had only ever had to deal with heartache, never strenuous exercise. With his hand Sinnick felt his pounding chest and with his fingers his throbbing neck. "Not too bad," he wheezed. "Pulse 105. Blood pressure 162 over 98. It'll soon come down."

"Are you sure?"

"Only time will tell, Freud" Sinnick gasped. "By the way, we need a proper medical term for these exertions of mine."

"What's wrong with press-ups?"

"It is inaccurate, Freud. These are fuck ups."

"Woah. Doctors should never swear, you said. It degrades the profession you said."

"Forgive me, Freud. It's only between you and me but press-ups where the abdomen rises less than an inch above the floor require a more accurate description. But, there's no time for deliberations. In fact..." he paused, turning onto his back in exhaustion, "In fact there's no time for anything. Time no longer marches on. It sprints. Our few moments of honest, man to man discourse, our privacy, our chance to do, say and think what we like without guilt, the need to record them on spread sheets or have them approved by Government-appointed box-tickers will be shattered in the morning. And, of course, there's the inquisition when I return home."

"By which you mean questions about your red face and breathlessness."

"A woman's suspicions, Freud. As if I could be bothered, let alone have the energy, to dabble in anything extracurricular other than my honest poetry."

(Sinnick's poetry on subjects ranging from political correctness and feminism to bureaucracy, haemorrhoids and liver disease had become a serious but welcome distraction from Sinnick's day to day monotony.)

He sat up, tried to touch his toes with his fingertips and heard an ominous crack which he thought came from either the L4 or L5 lumbar vertebra.

"It sounds as if it's time to stop the exercises before you cripple yourself."

“You’re right, Freud. Perhaps three days was enough.”

He struggled to his feet and collapsed into the chair on which, come morning, Mrs. Pettifer would sit, wave her arms around and dictate the day to day management of not only Sinnick’s clinic but Sinnick’s life.

He scratched the part of his head, the bare scalp, that lay above the ring of sparse grey hair and groped for the half-moon spectacles that had fallen off earlier. “We need some new medical terminology Freud. The world has moved on since the days of Hippocrates. Greek and Latin no longer mean anything to the man or woman in the street least of all our youth. In our case we need a word that describes therapeutic talking to oneself. It must slide off the tongue and be bandied around as if the user knows a thing or two about medical matters. What the word must not do, though, is make those of us who converse with ourselves appear so dangerous to the public that we aren’t allowed out unaccompanied. We are not idiots or perverts, you realise.” He paused. “What does it sound like in there, Freud?”

“There’s a loud banging. Would that be the carotid artery?”

“Very likely. Ignore it. If it bursts, we’ll both know soon enough.”

And, with that, he lay his head on Mrs. Pettifer’s desk amongst her files, spreadsheets, tubes of hand cream and rows of family photos and wondered, for a moment, if some early stage, age-related mental deterioration had set in, obvious to everyone but himself. Not that Mrs. P and her army of female staff would have cared. The priorities to which they were unanimously in favour i.e. ensuring their private lives dominated over paid work, would continue.

Lying there, he had a close up of one Mrs. P’s photos. It was close enough to convince him that each of her three sisters had also been born with green eyes with vertical slits for pupils. Perhaps, he concluded, it was not a family at all but a coven.

He returned to his own mental health. He was sure he still appeared, superficially at least, a sane and intelligent man. How else could he have survived the many changes forced on him by the Health Trust, the Government, the increasingly outrageous demands of the general public and Mrs. Pettifer’s daily reminders about fairness, equal rights, bullying and the need to recognise diversity and sexual orientation. He raised his head above the debris and, for a moment, spoke in a shrill, soprano voice. *“After all, Doctor Sinnick, we can’t be too careful. We must spot signs of abuse before it all ends up in the Courts.”*

Freud chose to ignore this but Sinnick, as he always did, trembled for a moment at the thought of being dragged before the Court and struck off. He thought instead about the newest member of Mrs. P’s staff, Polly Anne, who he’d recently started calling “Druss”. Sinnick’s humour was rarely understood by others but unrelentingly therapeutic to himself. He managed a short, evil-

looking grin but knew he must go careful. Nick names were no longer an opportunity for an innocent giggle. Banned, along with other innocent habits of a lifetime, they were forms of harassment and bullying and another reason for the involvement of the Courts. "Do my lips move, Freud?"

"I wasn't sure if I should mention it. Try not to think about it. No-one's here except you and me."

"So, they move?"

"Just a little."

"Are sounds emitted?"

"Faint ones. I caught two words – sexual and abuse."

"Any others?"

"Perhaps I heard misogynist."

"Impossible, Freud. I never use the word. When Mrs. P used it to describe me, I had to look up the meaning."

Sinnick sighed. Everything had spun out of his control, even the overreaction of Mrs. Sinnick to the cat's change of hair colour. How was he to know that the bottle he thought was water was actually hydrogen peroxide? Didn't anyone teach the thousands of giggling hairdressers that Krupton College churned out in numbers that far exceeded the demand that hydrogen peroxide was H₂O₂ and not H₂O?

"It's not schizophrenia, you know, Freud. Albert Einstein talked to himself. He and I are very similar. Just by looking at his facial expression you can tell he wasn't an enthusiastic socialiser. And it's obvious that being photographed made him feel uneasy. Albert preferred his own, more stimulating company. He wasn't schizophrenic. He was above that sort of thing. Schizophrenia onset is typically between ages fifteen and twenty-five. We call it insidious onset, Freud. Did you know that? I didn't start talking to myself until I was forty. What's more I can pinpoint the exact moment. Eleven thirty-six at night on my fortieth birthday at Luigi's and, in the absence of more stimulating conversation, Mrs. Sinnick chose to totally ignore my observations on the elasticity and snapping point of spaghetti despite my generosity in paying for the meal. I thought damn it, I'll test my theory by lining up pieces of spaghetti on the table-cloth and stretching them whilst discussing the experiment with myself and other diners."

"Did they seem interested?"

"Amused, Freud. Especially when Mrs. S got up and walked out."

Sinnick smiled to himself. It had been an interesting experiment, each strand of spaghetti snapping at such unexpectedly low points. He'd wondered whether

cooking times affected elasticity but there was no way to test it. He'd specially ordered it al dente because it was his birthday.

"Don't you think you should be going home?"

"Yes. Perhaps. I'll tell her I took the dog for a walk."

"You don't have a dog, Sinnick."

At 'The Firs' on Park Avenue, Quentin Kelp had opted to sleep on the floor in his upstairs office because earlier in the day, he'd upset Mrs. Kelp. All he'd done was to suggest that her crotchety mood might be due to PMT. But then he'd made it worse by adding, *"Or is such an event a thing of the past?"*

Women were such sensitive creatures, Quentin thought. And it hadn't entirely been his fault. Hector, despite it being midday, was still lying on the sofa in his Spiderman pajamas playing with his phone. He'd barely moved an inch until the row started. *"Woss PMT, dad?"* The question was accompanied by a knowing smirk and Quentin had thought about hitting him with his Sunday Times but then thought better of it. The boy was too well informed on child abuse.

Instead, he'd tossed the paper aside and watched Mrs. K moving things around, between their feet and above their heads, flapping cloths, spraying lavender from a can, sighing and groaning. Thick clouds of dust particles were visible in the beam from his reading lamp and Quentin, who was convinced he was allergic to dust mites, had yelled at Hector. "Help your mother, Hector."

Hector hadn't moved of course but muttered something about being fully occupied on his astronomy homework. Indeed, he was. Hector was playing something that involved aliens from distant planets. Quentin had often mentioned to colleagues that Hector's list of excuses for doing nothing was far in advance of his age.

So, from that point on, Quentin's day had deteriorated, the howling wind and steady rain outside made worse by the constant, niggling reminder that he was no longer Krupton's elected Member of Parliament with its regular pay cheques, pension and status.

Quentin was an ex politician and, at the rate things were going, a divorcee with an extortionate mortgage caused by a woman's devotion to having a house that matched her status. Her previous status, Quentin surmised.

In his upstairs office, Quentin stared sadly at the ceiling. For five years this place beneath the Velux window had been the powerhouse of Quentin's bid to become Prime Minister. Quentin was a man not from Eton or Marlborough or even from the Train Driver's Union or National Front but a man with his feet firmly on the ground who might be seen pushing a cart amongst all other Saturday morning shoppers and appearing to check milk prices, the real country

of origin of English Cheddar cheese and the expiry date on packets of digestive biscuits.

Now, this small area of privacy only served to remind him that it had not been fitted with furniture from craftsmen like Hepplewhite or Chippendale that that obnoxious old Etonian Sir Benjamin Craddock, the Secretary of State for Transport, deemed normal but by a local chippie called Ken with a fetish for Ikea, tongue and groove and cheap plaster board. Quentin's powerhouse was merely a space beneath the roof, a converted attic.

But could it still become the place from which he would rise from the ashes of that freak election result – that dreadful night when Prudence Bottomley, a pathetic Neo-Liberal who taught creative writing at Krupton College and only ever wore a beige cardigan and a pony tail, struck a dagger into the beating heart of dynamic Kelpism with her downright lies and undeliverable promises?

Despite the view of grey sky, streaming rain and the waving branches of the fir tree through the Velux window Quentin sat up, driven by a deep-seated determination to see things through. It was only a setback. One day, he would return. He could even see the headlines: *“Quentin Kelp's Truth and Honesty Party - A Landslide!”*

And then, just as suddenly, there came the depressing realization that he needed to pay the mortgage and tomorrow he had an interview for a job – as the PR consultant to a London firm of Financial Advisers who, unknown to them, he had once described as loan sharks with a mean streak.

When Paddy woke at 7am, Seamus Heaney was lying in a crumpled mess beneath the duvet. It was a shame, Paddy thought, but it matched the photo of Seamus himself on the front cover. Seamus wouldn't have minded the creases.

As it was another dark and dismal morning, Paddy switched on the bedroom light, reached for his glasses and went to the bathroom to check the fingers and thumb on his right hand. They were still sore from having dropped the newly framed copy of his Food Hygiene Certificate into the deep fryer used for battered haddock fillets. Neither Gabriela or Agnieska had seemed to think it important to tell him the oil was already at boiling point though, to be fair, Gabriela was still using the Polish word for hot and Agnieska described everything above tepid as 'eez ot'.

Burned fingers and hot oil were an occupational hazard in running a fish & chip shop. He'd go to bed stinking of hot oil mixed with fried cod, haddock, battered sausages and chips.

He checked his hair in the mirror. There wasn't much left of the fine, ginger mop he'd been born with but at least the jokes had stopped. In fact, the one

about growing old and turning grey being the only thing that ginger kids looked forward to in life had come true.

His short, grey beard was now his main feature, highlighted as it sometimes was by the flecks of green from mushy peas and smears of orange baked beans that stuck to it. Mixed with the white of his hair, this color combination was, of course, very patriotic to a true Irishman and Paddy would often delay washing his beard until the last minute.

That morning, there was no sign of anything other than white and grey but he left it unwashed anyway. Mrs. O'Brian, Maeve, would, of course, have quickly pointed out such unhygienic habits but she'd long since returned to Cork where the air was more refreshing.

Paddy double-checked his sore fingers. "Ah, you're not looking so bad this morning but we'll get Albert to take a look at you tonight so we will."

He brushed his teeth, swilled, spat and then examined a back tooth in the toothpaste-spattered mirror. "Ah, there's nothing to be seen but, by Jesus, sometimes....."

Next, he snipped at a few stray strands of his beard. It wasn't a long, thick beard like Charlie's because, if it was, the Food Hygiene requirements would insist on wearing a mask as if he was performing open heart surgery instead of slicing open a dead haddock. Paddy's beard was a failed, perhaps overgrown attempt at the sort of designer stubble David Beckham might have made instantly fashionable at age sixty-three. The other similarity was with 007.

"Ah, Sean Connery so it is," he said, nodding at his reflection. "Red finger not Goldfinger."

He winked to acknowledge himself and then put the two sorest fingers to his lips sideways on and blew on them. This was not to cool the throbbing heat, of course, but to disperse the gun smoke. "The name's Bond. James Bond," Paddy said winking at himself. "Miss Anders, is it? I didn't recognize you with your clothes on."

In the shower, Paddy just stood and let hot water pour on his head and run like a waterfall over the chalky whiteness of his round stomach. But he was still Bond. "I'm sorry if it's too hot in here with me, Miss Money Penny, but if the water's too cold the chip oil congeals and blocks the drain, you see."

He paused as if listening to Miss Money Penny's response. "Yes, I know. Ten years is enough for anyone. I need to sell the feckin' business while we've still got a few customers left. Would you be wanting to buy a fish and chip shop, Miss Money Penny? Could you live on income that's lower than minimum wage? Ha! Of course. I'd forgotten. You'd jump in bed with Mr. Bond and he'd make up the difference."

Indeed, Paddy O'Brian was at his wits end, desperate for a fresh challenge and well qualified as a member of the Red Lion club with Charlie, Quentin and Albert Sinnick.

Frying fish for a living had not been his idea. It had been Maeve's. She'd watched a TV program about a fish and chip shop that had been bought out by a big chain leaving the owner enough to buy a yacht that he moored on the French Riviera, but when she realized how much she hated the smell of hot oil, Maeve had left Paddy in charge and opted for the somewhat cooler Irish Riviera.

Since then, Paddy often wished for a strong wind from the east that would blow the feckin' chip shop vapors across the Irish sea back to Cork.

'Opening times: 11am to 2pm and 6pm to 11pm except Sundays' it said on Paddy's front door. He had recently invested in two plastic tables and four plastic chairs for those who preferred to dine in rather than walk around town eating with a plastic fork from a plastic tray. The only way Paddy got any time off to do his VAT return, keep track of his losses and share his remorse with Quentin, Albert and Charlie, was to employ ethnically varied occasional staff like Hamid from Istanbul, Gabriela from Gdansk, Agnieszka from Bucharest, Joshua from Lagos and Luzia from Portugal.

Paddy had no idea how they communicated with each other especially as they only turned up when it suited them. But, with a bit of help now and again from Emma from Bulgaria and Silvi from Latvia, he could sometimes excuse himself and wander down to the Red Lion for an hour or so of male interaction in a language he understood. The only thing that would disturb him was if the emergency fire service roared by, lights flashing, heading for the High Street.

Paddy dressed himself in his purple trousers and red, checked shirt, went to the tiny kitchen, poured cornflakes into a dish, sprinkled sugar, doused it with cold milk and wandered to the window overlooking the High Street. Despite the rain and wind, he opened it and leaned out.

Being Monday morning, the street hadn't yet come to life, not that the rows of Victorian properties with their faded shop fronts, most of which could be seen in black and white on hundred-year-old photos, ever saw much trade these days. In their wisdom the Council had designated the street as 'traffic free' and 'pedestrian friendly' which meant delivering essential goods to the few surviving businesses was nigh on impossible. Paddy's frozen chips and raw fish were shipped out on a forty-foot truck and then wheeled up the street on a trolley. Tesco, of course, parked their forty-foot truck right outside their warehouse next to their private car park with its space for three hundred cars.

As Paddy munched cornflakes two wheezing old ladies passed below, dragging bags on wheels. They didn't glance up because they couldn't and so had no idea Paddy was watching over them like God from twenty feet above. He saw a

spotty-looking youth in a backwards-facing baseball cap who should have been on his way to school clattering on a skateboard and there was the sound of the Council rubbish lorry reversing somewhere. There was a dog lying next to a bundle of blankets in the doorway of the Cats Protection League shop and Angus the postman was shoving bundles of trash mail under the shutters of another derelict shop a few yards up. Paddy sighed.

The view from his window was always like this - as inspiring as if he was watching the Irish rugby team getting thrashed by Scotland at Lansdowne Road.

A damp pigeon then flapped by and landed on the pigeon-shit-covered ledge of the window next door, but at least it bowed and scraped and cooed at him as if he was royalty. Paddy threw it a few cornflakes, but they didn't travel that far in the wind but flew back at him before fluttering down to the street.

Paddy put his empty bowl down and shut his eyes to summon a vision of something better than being the owner of a take-away that only survived by paying money to foreigners who lived in a fog of hash smoke around the corner on Midland Road. And what heavenly vision of the future sprang from behind Paddy's closed lids? Not one. Not even the faintest glimmer of light showed itself even though he squeezed his eyes so tightly that when he opened them again nothing was in focus. He blinked to clear them.

"A four-foot box, a foot for every year." Seamus Heaney had once written in a sad piece of prose that Paddy would read with enforced sniffing. Paddy's words would have been different. *One foot forward, two feet backwards. Then the box."*

Paddy's mind, in the past the source of so much color, vision and enthusiasm, was a complete blank. It was as inspiring as the brick wall he could see from the bedroom. There was not even a glimmer of light between the back of the Cats Protection League charity shop and the rear wall of the public toilets. Inside Paddy's mind it was as black..... as black as.....Paddy struggled to drag something poetic from memory. *"Ah yes. As black as the tempest cloud that flies, across the dark and muttering skies,"* he said, wondering where he'd read that.

But it did something to Paddy's brain. The sudden challenge triggered a flash of other ancient memories. Paddy, at school in Cork, being asked to recite a poem by James Joyce aloud to the class just because he'd taken off his shoes and Tommy Byrne had kicked them so hard and so far, they'd hit the teacher's desk.

"Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam pots. Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots. Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills."

How Paddy would have liked to go blackberry picking without having to rush back to open the shop and breath in the stink of hot oil, vinegar and Heinz tomato ketchup. How Paddy would have liked to sit and read poetry without the

guilt of knowing a burned and blackened chip was still lying out of reach beneath the sink or wondering what had gone so wrong that Maeve had suddenly caught the Ryan Air flight to Cork with no discussion and no explanation and only a note with her sister's phone number. Or why daughter Mary had dropped out of University and gone to live with some Canadian guy in Toronto because: "*We like each other's accents, Dad.*"

Jesus wept.

PART TWO:

At 9.30 am, after hours of forced dozing, Charlie McTavish finally opened his eyes. He was not, by nature, a late sleeper but, since he'd gone to live above Fook's Wok, he would delay opening his eyes for the horror of seeing where he was.

Charlie's room was too small for anything much more than sleeping so for a while he lay, hairy and naked, on the single, sagging bed and stared up at the water-stained ceiling. Finally, he threw the tartan blanket aside and sat up. This place really was the pits but, over the last ten years, circumstances had taken hold of Charlie's destiny. Surely, a fifty-six-year-old accountant had a right to believe he'd have something left after thirty-five years of hard work? Charlie, though, hated fights and arguments. Despite his ferocious-looking appearance, the thick beard, the biker-leathers and the dark glasses, Charlie was too timid. He was too nice. Charlie would rather hide or run away than engage in bitter arguments and disputes. It had been his downfall.

He took a deep breath. Right now, he felt surprisingly hungry.

Dining on fish fingers and baked beans at Paddy's last night had been like a night out in the West End for Charlie. Paddy had even produced two cans of diet coke. For breakfast, though, Charlie always ate whatever was left lying around in Fook's kitchen downstairs although there was a limit to how many left-over portions of chicken and black bean sauce or cold egg noodles Charlie's stomach could take.

From his bed he looked around his box-like, windowless room. It could be summer, autumn, winter or spring outside for all Charlie knew though the ceiling above his head suggested it was still the rainy season.

His boots sat neatly, side by side, facing the door as if they knew they needed to be ready to flee this dump at any moment, and his leathers were strewn over three boxes stuffed with old accountancy files. He pulled a hand through his beard, scratched his armpits and concluded he needed to visit the downstairs toilet fairly promptly. For washing, Charlie used Fook's kitchen sink, also

downstairs, which first meant clearing space, taking out the black plastic bags of garbage and scouring Fook's saucepans and woks. In return for janitorial and other kitchen duties, Charlie had negotiated a rental deal which meant he got the accommodation at less than half price.

He stood, pulled on a pair of Y-fronts and a sweater, went downstairs, did his job in the toilet and then scanned the kitchen scene. He'd seen worse. Fook's Sunday night trade was never as good as Friday or Saturday. He opened one of the polystyrene take-away boxes, found an untouched portion of sweet and sour pork, matched it with a spoonful of cold rice from the rice cooker and ate his breakfast. He scoured the woks and saucepans, threw food, plastic spoons, forks and other detritus into the black bag and carried it outside to find it was, of course, raining.

Outside, under a plastic sheet and propped next to the wheelie bins, was Charlie's Honda motorcycle. It should have been a Harley 1200 Custom but that had proved impossible. Nevertheless, he patted the Honda's dripping handlebars, looked beneath the sheet to check the seat was dry and returned inside. Next, with the sink cleared, he lifted his feet, washed them in Fairy Liquid and then started on the rest. By 10.30 am Charlie, washed, fed, clean and smelling of lemon dishwasher was ready to start work.

He returned upstairs and pulled out his most valuable possession, his laptop, from beneath the bed. He sat on the floor and logged onto the internet via Wi-Fi that came, albeit with unreliable connectivity, courtesy of Fook's Laundrette and Dry Cleaners next door. If Charlie could just find one company needing an accountant with twenty-five years' experience or a good business idea that wouldn't need start-up funds or a bank loan he might, at last, be able to move on.

Charlie had never been the most extrovert of men but it explained why he and Albert Sinnick had struck up such an easy-going relationship and how he'd then met Paddy and Quentin. Every detail of his first meeting with Sinnick was fixed indelibly on Charlie's memory.

His appointment at Krupton Health Clinic had been at 9.10am on a Wednesday morning, so he'd sat there in his leathers with his crash helmet on his knee. At last, at 9.35, he'd heard his name called. "*Mr. McTavish, Room One. Doctor Sinnick.*"

He'd got up, his boots and leathers squeaking down the corridor and knocked twice on the door of Room One. Hearing nothing he'd gone inside to find Sinnick staring at his computer.

After standing, nervously twirling the threads of his beard, Charlie coughed, sat down on what he took to be the patient's chair and put his crash helmet on the floor. Sinnick, meanwhile, had continued to stare at his computer whilst tapping

his teeth with a pen and muttering something about sneezing and freezing and wheezing. Suddenly he'd jumped. "That's it, Freud - pleasing. Good man."

Then, much to Charlie's surprise, he'd sat back in his chair and looked at him. "Good Lord, have you been there long?"

"Five minutes or so."

"You should have knocked. Right. Let me see." Sinnick had checked his screen. "Harry Smallwood? Maurice Cook?"

"Charles McTavish."

"McTavish, McTavish. Yes, here we are. What's wrong this time?"

"I've only been here once before."

"Well done. So why come today?"

"Spot of bother down under."

"I see. I'll need a fresh tube of KY then if I can't trust your own diagnosis."

"Hemorrhoids."

"Tried everything?"

"The usual. They might need ligating."

"Perhaps you mean ligating?"

"That's it."

"I'll make you an appointment. Got a phone number?"

Charlie had handed over his card. "Charles McTavish: Accountant."

"Accountant?" Sinnick said curiously, scanning Charlie from his black leather boots up to his long grey beard. "Are you sure?"

Charlie nodded. The beard had grown recently but the rest of him had remained unchanged for quite a while.

"Ah well. I'll text you something this afternoon. Everything else, OK?"

"Fine. Just the hemorrhoids."

That had been it. Charlie squeaked his way back down the corridor and went on his way. By co-incidence, though, they'd met again that same evening at the bar in the Red Lion. Sinnick had been sitting in the corner with Quentin and Paddy and it was his turn to buy.

Most people in Krupton knew Doctor Albert Sinnick. They knew him but he often failed to recognize them until they opened their mouths or their shirt fronts or lay half naked behind the curtain on his couch. It was names that eluded Sinnick. On that occasion, though, he recognized Charlie by his beard,

the dark glasses, the black leather jacket and trousers and the crash helmet that he'd placed on the bar next to his half pint of lager and lime.

"Evening," Sinnick said with a faint nod, "Do I know you?"

"Hemorrhoids. This morning."

"Of course. Get the text message?"

"Thanks."

And that had been that until a few weeks later when it was the same routine and the same location. On that occasion, though, Charlie had moved his crash helmet to give Sinnick some elbow space.

"Don't tell me - hemorrhoids," Sinnick said barely turning his head. "Cured?"

"Thanks. The litigation worked."

Sinnick nodded, satisfied but appalled by the man's understanding of the procedure he'd undergone. "A quick thank you would have been appreciated."

"Pardon me?"

"What year did they erupt before you decided to pay me a visit?"

"2010."

"Was that when I first saw you?"

"No. Sprained ankle. 2017. Fell off the bike."

Sinnick looked at the helmet and then the leathers. "Of course. I remember the crash helmet. I couldn't hear a word you said."

"Once it's on I don't feel it," Charlie said. "Sorry. I should have taken it off,"

"Still riding it?"

Charlie nodded sadly not wishing to mention that the leather gear and helmet had been bought for a tough-looking Harley not a timid little Honda.

For the first time, Sinnick had looked him in the eye seeing something else: something that didn't quite match Charlie's rough Hell's Angel image. "I'm surprised you haven't been arrested for wearing it," he said with as much kindness as he could muster.

"I was. Barclays Bank. Someone pressed the panic button. Quite extraordinary seeing I was queuing behind a woman in a full burka."

"Tall woman? Red high heels, red finger nails and tight jeans beneath the burka?"

"You know her?"

"Certainly, but I never get too close. Doctor Manley sees her."

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