

Crash and Other Stories

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Enigma

I'm walking home from work, up Friar's Hill, where I live near the top. It's a steady half-hour walk from the office but I've stopped using the car since the doctor advised me to get more exercise.

The setting sun has turned scattered clouds a deep red and I'm enjoying the last warm rays on my face. The trees along this stretch of the road smell dry and brittle. Another scorcher is expected tomorrow. Today was a long hot slog at the office between heavy meetings and awkward questions. Now I'm looking forward to a quiet drink at home with my feet up and then a good night's sleep.

I see a man coming towards me and it seems as if he is walking straight out of the sun. As he comes closer his silhouetted shape becomes familiar then recognizable. Something between shock and amazement stops me dead in my tracks. This man is my father. I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. Can it be, I wonder, that the glowing red sky coupled with weariness are causing my eyes to play tricks on me? I shake myself and stare at the figure, haloed in sunlight, still moving towards me. There's no mistake. It's my father right enough. My father who's been dead these twenty years.

My heart misses a full beat and the breath catches in my throat. Stumbling against the wall, as my legs give way, I push hard against the rough stones to right myself. I just can't believe what I'm seeing.

“Hello, Micileen,” he says, greeting me with a smile and using the Gaelic version of my name - *‘Little Michael’* - as he always did during his lifetime. He grasps my hand firmly and its warmth brings me back to childhood. I can feel tears welling in my eyes

“You look tired,” he says, head tilted back, scrutinizing my face. My father is a short man, a head smaller than me, but his broad shoulders give him a strong solid stance.

“Pop,” is all I can say. So glad to see him; to touch him again. But I still can't believe that, on this warm evening, I'm standing here with the father who reared me with singular affection and taught me everything I know in business.

Then I recognize the dream. It's the same one I have whenever the pressures of business weigh me down like an over-loaded old fruit tree. That's when my father appears and we talk things over in the quiet logical way he had about him. He smiles his way through the problems as if business was only some game to be toyed with and enjoyed.

When he died twenty years ago I inherited the company. Everything ran smoothly for a while until Japanese competition increased. Then, as things got tougher, the dreams started. When the pressures got me down and I couldn't untangle myself from a knot of worries he'd come to me, in my sleep, and help unravel them. The following morning I'd wake with a clear head and renewed energy. My staff, in turn, responded with fresh ideas and strategies that gradually nudged the sales graph back up again. And the dream was forgotten until the next crisis.

“Pop.” I stammer again, launching into a tale of woe about today's strenuous meetings with the sales department. Business has never been so bad. It's as if our market has suddenly shrunk. We've had to discontinue three of our best lines because we can no longer produce them at competitive prices. And it looks like we'll have to take one or two reps off the road. Cut-backs all round seem to be the only way out of this mess.

Back in my own office, surrounded by sheaves of paper recording the plummeting sales figures, insufficient Autumn budget, and the

Bank's warnings about future borrowing, I felt totally a lone and disheartened. The future looks bleak and for the first time I'm considering selling the company, for whatever I can get, and retiring. At least the house is my own and I won't starve. I'm getting too tired for these weighty problems and there's no-one to take on the burden of my desk. I never married and have no heirs. Sometimes I wonder if I ever had the aptitude for the manufacturing business. Maybe what it needs now is a younger, fresher, approach.

Like a lost child I shamefully blurt all this out to my father. The business he single handedly founded, nurtured, expanded, and passed on to me, has come to this.

He listens quietly, head slightly to one side, lips pursed. I wait dejectedly for his wise words. He's still holding my hand and, as I feel his energy running into me like a warm stream, I begin to relax. I'm happy to simply stand here with him and wait for advice but now his look changes and he seems to be gazing beyond me at some distant object.

"There's someone I would like you to meet," he says. "Someone you never met before." He pauses, watching my reaction, a soft glow fills his eyes. This is a new shift in the dream. I wonder what he means. Will he introduce me to some new person who I will employ and bring into the firm? Someone who will change the course of these present downward sales trends?

He laughs softly as if reading my jumbled thoughts. "No," he says. "Let's forget business for the moment. This is more important. This is a beautiful wee woman who you know but sadly have never seen. Her name is Kathleen." His face spreads in a wide smile as he watches my puzzled expression, "Your mother."

A great gush of emotion erupts inside my chest and threatens to throw me to the ground. My mother died when I was born. I feel the warm stones under my hand as I reach to steady myself again.

"Are you all right Mr. O'Sullivan?" a voice filters through to me. A car has pulled up and a young man, whom I recognize as my new neighbour from the top of the hill, is leaning across the passenger seat and peering at me. "Can I give you a lift?"

I indicate my father to him, and that we are talking, but I realize that he is not aware of the dream so I make a walking gesture with my fingers. "For the good of my health," I call out. He nods, sympathetically, and drives off.

The sun, down behind the hill now, is throwing my father into silhouette. It's difficult for me to make out his face. He continues as if there had been no interruption. "She's waited a long time Micileen," he says fondly. "Over sixty years," he adds, shaking his head slowly as if reading my thoughts.

I sorely want to discuss business with him, but yes, I want to meet my mother too, even if it is only in a dream. My father's voice, though still soft, is full of urgency and authority. "You'll like her, Micileen, she's a grand wee woman."

But I feel agitated, wanting this dream to follow the usual pattern. There's a vital need to solve the immediate business problems in order to face my staff tomorrow. I'm confused. After all, if my mother has waited over sixty years surely ...

I want to wake and then go back to sleep again just to have the familiar old dream. But now, shamefully, I realize my selfishness. If my mother wishes to meet me how can I refuse?

My father takes both my hands in his and looks me straight in the eyes. "Micileen. Son." His voice has become a soft embrace and I'm no match for his charm. "Forget the worries of today. They can be solved. But, believe me, this cannot wait."

He looks down and I follow his gaze. There, lying on the ground between us, is the still body of a man. With a jolt which shakes me to the core I recognize myself. I slowly realize that this is not the old dream any more. There will be no more old dreams. What's happening is not a dream at all.

The sun has disappeared behind the hill now, but to me, everything is bathed in a golden, translucent light. Together my father and I walk up the hill, side by side, hand in hand. I'm like a child again, skipping along, up this hill for the last time. And, for the first time in sixty-two years I am going to meet my mother, who I have never known.

And I am overjoyed.

A Game Of Cowboys

Precisely at twelve noon, for the past five months, a tall gangling man, dressed in shabby clothes appears between the high pillars of the back gates of the warehouse where I am manager. Feet spread, fingers curled and poised, he is ready for the draw. Waiting just inside the big doorway of the stores, across the yard, ready to step out and confront him, is a tall man in a pale blue business suit. My assistant and I busy ourselves with checking lists. But out of the corner of our eyes we watch closely.

“Hey you!”, the gangly man’s shrill voice echoes across the yard and the man in the blue suit takes a step forward from the shadows. They reach for their “six-guns”; simultaneously blazing away “Bam! Bam! Bam!” Each time they play out this charade the man in the business suit gets plugged first and stumbles back. The gangly man always wins — because the one in the blue suit lets him.

Nothing unusual about this. Every town has its “Shoots” or its “Bang Bang” character. It might seem unusual for an old waster of a man and one in the prime of his life to play a game of cowboys almost every morning. You would think at least one of them had better things to do but, you see, and this is the difference — the man in the blue suit is our Managing Director, Frank D. Barnes and “Bam Bam”, as we call the gangly one, is his father. The staff in the

warehouse and the stores and the offices all know who “Bam Bam” is. The sad thing is everybody knows it except him and that is why they turn a sorry eye on this little pageant every noon. Not only is “Bam Bam” the father of our Managing Director, but, incredible as it may seem, he is also the owner of this whole complex of plumbing store, timber yard, D.I.Y. shop, tool shop and builder’s providers. Strangers shake their heads incredulously when told this, and who could blame them.

Furthermore, “Bam Bam”, or to give him his rightful name, James Daniel Barnes, is the chairman of the board and nobody around here would ever tolerate an unsavoury word against him.

James Daniel Barnes, known to everyone simply as J.D., in his day, was something of a tycoon. He built up this huge business from almost nothing. He started off by taking over his father’s small plumbing business when he was only fifteen, when his dad died suddenly - from liver failure. Young J.D., knew almost as much as his dad about plumbing, having accompanied him on numerous working trips from an early age, even, at times, having to drive the old van. He was fond of telling us later, with a knowing wink, that earning his living was a thousand times better than being “stuck in dat auld school”. And, it’s obvious, too, that he enjoyed taking risks, because at the time, the place where he opened his first plumbing supplies shop was three miles from the centre of the town on a quiet country road.

Young J. D., it seemed, was never one for taking the obvious route and must have had a hunch about the future, because today, his business is surrounded by housing estates and well positioned just off the dual carriageway. J.D. Barnes was the local supplier and, with surprising speed he built up the business, expanding department by department, to what it is today. When I was at school with his sons it was already a thriving business and himself driving around in a long white Jaguar car, the first of its kind in these parts and the envy of us all.

J. D. quickly became a highly respected business man in the county. He ran for election in the Town Council and soon became a popular Councilor. But to see that man now, gaunt, in ill-fitting clothes,

shuffling on his daily walk from the nursing home into town and back would break your heart as it does his son's, and ours, every day.

He is a rich man, of course, but he doesn't remember that either. He doesn't need to wear shabby clothes. But, no matter how many new suits Frank leaves for him at the nursing home, he wears them only once.

He wears it to the Thrift shop, changes into old clothes in the fitting room, pays for them, then donates the new suit to the shop. This nettled his son, as his father was always a fastidious dresser, but the Thrift shop staff, recently, have taken to simply wrapping it up and returning it to Frank who sends it back to the nursing home again.

The question in everyone's mind is, where did it all go wrong? What reduced J.D. from a wealthy and highly regarded businessman to the local bum who goes around shouting "Hey you" at everyone and blasting them with his imaginary "six-guns". It will remain a mystery until something prods his lost memory or shocks him back to his old dynamic self. I, like all who associated with him, from the senior staff to the board of directors to the women in the canteen, want this to happen soon. After all he is still the chairman of the company, his company, and we all want him back at the helm where he belongs.

It is common knowledge that J. D. got wealthy fairly quickly. He had an uncanny knack for being in the right place at the appropriate time. The complex of housing estates which now surround his yards and warehouses were the cause of the original growth of the company. He supplied every piece of plumbing to every house. And considering that he was only in his early twenties when he secured the contracts it was something of a coup. He then began to expand into building supplies and once again he was successful in supplying to the new estates growing like satellites around him. His subsequent election to the Town Council and later to the County Council came fairly quickly before he was thirty. When his sons and I were at school and going through our "skinhead" phase, it was presumed that J.D. would be the next, and youngest ever, chairman of the County Council. If his son's shaved head and safety-pin jewelry, or

his friends, were ever an embarrassment to him, for we spent a lot of time in his house, it being the largest and boasting the latest TV and Hi-Fi equipment, he never complained. Later the local papers were hailing him as a surety in the next General Election to take a seat. But that was before his sudden strange trips abroad and the period he went missing.

There is only rumour and speculation about what happened to J.D. while he was ten years on the missing list. Unfortunately, we don't have his story as he has hardly spoken a full sentence to anyone since he stepped off the bus five months ago, emaciated, and collapsed in a heap at the bus station. It was as if all his remaining energy had been harnessed to get him to this point in time. It was the old ambulance driver who recognized him and rang Frank at his office. There was nobody else from the family left in town. J.D.'s wife, Maura, had passed away several years before and his eldest son, James Junior, after a row with his father, had emigrated to Australia as soon as he left school, and had not kept in touch.

It was after his younger son, Frank, graduated with an Economics degree and was brought into the business that J.D. suddenly started taking long trips abroad. It was assumed that he had gone in search of James Junior but now, it seems certain, this was not the case.

J.D. would come home from these trips with hardly a comment or explanation about where he had been or what he had seen, but with a restless glint in his eyes and a frenzied vigour for work. He would produce from his pockets or baggage weird souvenirs. These were mostly about the size of a fist and resembled squat females or horned bulls, or the like, with grotesque expressions painted in bizarre colours. These he lined up on the sitting-room mantelpiece against much protest from his wife, who became more troubled with each trip her husband undertook. An almost demonic look would flash from his eyes at these moments. The law was duly laid down that his collection was not to be interfered with under any circumstances. But, two years after J.D. went missing the last time, Maura, in a fit of desperation, flung the whole lot into the bin. People say that it was from this time that her health began to deteriorate and she died shortly afterwards.

It is a real mystery to everyone how J.D. managed to arrive home. Naturally, Frank had attempts made to trace his wanderings. But there is no record of his father having come through any known air or ferry port. He was not carrying a passport when he stepped off the bus. His journey out, ten years previously, stops dead in London. There was no large withdrawal from his bank account at the time and none at all in the interim. So how did he live? There is speculation that he was a government spy. This idea we find incredulous, but, who knows? And, if so, who sent him and why and where? And, above all, how did he end up in his present sorry state?

His son had forensic experts scrutinize his clothes thread by thread. There were strange seeds in the turn-up of his trousers traced to Venezuela. Hairs of animals from the forests of Borneo and female hair from a remote tribe of hill people in Mongolia were identified. Traces of arsenic and D.D.T. have been found in his system. There is a fist sized tattoo on his back behind his heart like five snakes entwined, but without heads. Photographs of this and zigzag scars on his upper arms have been distributed to anthropologists around the world, but to no avail. There is a strange phrase he is heard to mutter now and again. Frank has managed to have it recorded and sent all over the world to linguistic experts. They have shaken their heads over it. Perhaps it's just gibberish.

Visits to his home; meetings with members of the board of directors; the old parish priest; his old family doctor. Nothing had jogged J.D.'s memory. The Analysts in the nursing home have not ruled out the possibility that he could have been the victim of witch doctors in some remote part of the globe. Perhaps the Amazon. Maybe Central Africa - who knows! His son has left no possible test untried. But nothing has worked so far. Weird drugs in remote places, some say. Others hint at Voodoo. Nobody knows for certain. But something brought him back to his hometown and that, we are told is, in itself, positive and hopeful. And, some say, miraculous.

The doctors tell us not to give up. Not to treat him like a stranger. Not to ignore him. Don't avoid eye contact even though you get an uneasy feeling when you look into his hooded eyes. Something, somewhere, someday, will hopefully supply the jolt to bring him back from the dark edge of his mind to reality.

We pray for the day when this odd game of cowboys comes to an end. The day when the gangly man known as “Bam Bam” appears in the gateway of our yard and instead of shouting “Hey You”, will call instead, “Hey, son. It’s me, Dad. I’m home”.

Hanging In

"They're very interesting, of course," the Gallery proprietor said, turning away from Angela's paintings and, adjusting his bowtie, feigned interest in passers-by through the window. She studied his narrow back, her artist's eye automatically dividing the play of light and shade on the back of his shirt, while waiting for him to speak again.

She knew she had taken a chance bringing her work to this gallery. Landscapes and portraits by established artists, none of which strayed from the conventional, surrounded her. Their cozy commercialism indicated that her work was unlikely to be accepted here but she was determined to approach every gallery in the city. There must be at least one who would recognize her talent.

Angela's paintings, lined up along the bottom of the white wall, were a stark contrast to the existing exhibition above them. From her pictures the features and limbs of imaginary people, stared at the viewer, superimposed on clothes they might have worn, hung out to dry on clothes lines in a multitude of settings. They hung upside down, some dangling limply, some twisted as if in agony, others

entwined like lovers; in back yards, gardens, the balconies of high rise flats and draped across bushes at the roadside camp of *Travelers*. This was the first time since graduating from art college a year ago that Angela had been able to sustain a theme in her painting and was excited by the potential. The raw edge she sought in her work was beginning to manifest itself.

The proprietor swiveled from the window. His eyes opened wide in surprise when he saw Angela and her paintings still there, as if she were expected to vanish while his back was turned. He rubbed his small hands together briskly to cover his irritation. Angela took a deep breath in anticipation of rejection. The man's eyes flicked to her rising breasts then, meeting her gaze, quickly slid past her to the door. She let her breath out slowly, suppressing her anger, remembering someone telling her once that she was much too pretty to be an artist. Stubbornly she stood her ground.

The proprietor cleared his throat. "We're booked up for quite a while," he said, his gaze now focused on some point in mid-air behind her. "In fact it would be at least ... oh, six months, before we even begin to look at new work again."

She nodded, accepting the obvious rejection in his tone, knowing it would be the same story in six months time.

As she bent to retrieve her paintings she was aware of his eyes appraising her again now that she was no longer watching. Sod him, she thought angrily, if he'd paid more attention to my paintings ... ! Shrugging off her annoyance, she stacked her work carefully into the portfolio and zipped it shut.

He walked with her to the door and, opening it to let her out, paused in the entrance to squint up at the sky as if checking for rain, although the sun shone brightly on the mid-morning street, so that Angela had to squeeze past.

"Come back in a few months time, dear," he continued, resting a hand momentarily on the small of her back. Her teeth clenched in fury at the man's effrontery. "Let's see how we're fixed by then," he concluded, swinging the door closed behind her.

I don't think so, you bastard, Angela swore under her breath as she

hurried down the street.

In the past week she had shown her portfolio to five gallery owners. The reaction was much the same. 'Come back in six months.' 'You don't do landscapes by any chance?' 'Not developed enough for us, I'm afraid.' or, 'We may mount a group show early next year, perhaps then.'

Disheartening though the process was she had no intention of giving up. There were hundreds of artists ahead of her but, she reminded herself, they had had to start somewhere too.

Back at her flat Angela threw herself on the bed with relief, breathing in the familiar creamy aroma of paint and linseed oil which always had a soothing effect on her. Time, give me time and I'll hang with the best! It's just a matter of hanging in there, she reassured herself, smiling at the pun.

The screech of Tony's motorbike pulling up outside woke her from her daydreaming. Before she had time to swing her legs to the floor he had bounded up the stairs and flung himself beside her enveloping her in his arms and an aura of petrol and warm grease.

"I can see it went well for you," he teased. "Resting after a hard morning's bargaining with the arty-farty galleries, huh?"

"Same old story," Angela said, snuggling closer to him. "Give them pretty landscapes. That's all they want."

"They're only shopkeepers, like you say." He kissed her ear.

"They're not ready for you yet."

Angela pulled away from him and sat up. "What time is it, anyway? It must be lunchtime. Are you hungry?"

"Constantly," Tony replied, pulling her back in a fierce hug, kissing her hungrily and unzipping her jeans.

After their lovemaking, Tony lay naked in the sunlight streaming through the window, blowing smoke rings towards the ceiling. Angela, wrapped in a dressing gown was brewing coffee in the small kitchen.

"Hey, listen," he called, "why don't you paint me? Y'know,

reclining ‘Adonis’ and all that? You could pretty it up in a landscape for them.”

Angela carried the coffee into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. As she handed him a mug she glanced down the length of his well defined body which he kept in shape by working out twice weekly in the gym

"No," she sighed, "too small. That's the problem."

"Too small ... ?" he snorted. "That's now, after the deed is done. But not before, remember?"

Angela laughed and slapped his muscled thigh playfully. "No, I don't mean that, you eejit. It's my work I'm talking about." She stretched out her arms, slopping coffee onto the bed, causing him to jump back. "Bigger canvasses," she explained.

Tony flexed his muscles and winked at her. "Think big, that's what I always say." And, swinging himself off the bed, downed his coffee and zipped himself back into his clothes. "Gotta get back to the garage," he said, kissing her goodbye.

As the bike roared into the distance Angela was seized with sudden inspiration. Whisking the white linen sheets off her bed, oblivious to the fact they were a recent and expensive gift from her mother, Angela tugged until they ripped down the centre. Satisfied, she dropped them on the floor and raced outside to the garden shed where she remembered seeing a few lengths of timber and some rusting tools.

It was hard going with the old rusty saw but she managed to hack through them. She hammered the laths together into rough frames then stretched the sheets tightly over them. Working quickly she primed them, throwing the windows wide open to let out the pungent smell, then stood back viewing her work with satisfaction. Four large canvasses stood against the wall.

A bit rough, she thought, but they'll do for now. I must find a studio, this bedroom is too cramped. Maybe that's why I work so small. I need more space.

While waiting for the primer to dry Angela wondered how she could

get her hands on some big brushes. Then she remembered seeing several old household paintbrushes at her mother's. Without pausing to put on a jacket she raced out the door. Along the canal a woman and child threw crusts to the ducks. Angela watched as diamonds of light scattered along the gentle ripples. Pretty pictures, she thought ironically.

A sudden outburst of squabbling and squawking pierced the air as a flock of seagulls swooped out of the blue sky, dive-bombing the crusts and trying to scatter the ducks. On their home territory, and bigger than their scavenging sea cousins, the ducks chased them off, running along the top of the water screeching and spreading their wings in anger. The gulls soared and wheeled in preparation for another attack.

Angela watched the flying battle in amazement. The gulls don't usually come this far inland, she thought, unless a storm is brewing. She checked the sky behind her and could almost feel the weight of the large electric-grey cloud, pregnant with rain, blowing over the rooftops from the sea.

It was one of those summer squalls that springs unexpectedly out of the Atlantic. The excitement of the battle in the water below and the approaching storm above thrilled her. For a moment she stood, transfixed against the canal railings, filled with a fusion of the beauty, power and violence of nature.

This, she realized, was the missing element in her paintings. The instilled passion of life. A storm didn't ask for permission to blow; it raged regardless, sweeping all in its path. Seagulls swooped unceremoniously; aware only of the dictations of hunger. Tony didn't seek approval to make love to her; he took his pleasure brazenly. But the final thought made her wince. Perhaps she should be more stringent with him. Perhaps he was beginning to take her for granted. She put the thought to the back of her mind deciding to think about it later.

As she watched the scene before her, Angela recalled her early childish drawings hidden in the back of her copybooks. The pleasant little paintings to please her father. Praise for neat, careful work from teachers. Never really letting herself go. All through life, all through

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