

ERNESTINE AND KIT

} by *Kevin Barry*

Two ladies in their sixties made ground through north County Sligo in a neat Japanese car. The sky above Lough Gill was deep blue and the world was fat on the blood of summer. The speed limit was carefully abided and all the turns were slowed for. There was the carnival air of a fine Saturday in June. A vintage car show had drawn a crowd in 1920s boaters and blazers to Kilmore; the old Fords and Triumphs honked cheerfully in the sun, and the ladies, as they passed by, smiled and waved. There was a lengthy queue for the ferry ride to the lake isle of Inishfree, there were castles to be visited, and way-marked walks to be hotly trailed. All the shaded tables outside the village pubs were full and tinkled with glasses and laughter, and children played unguarded in the cool of the woods.

“When it gets a good old lick of weather at all,” Ernestine said, “this is one powerful country.”

“No place to compare,” Kit sighed, and heavily leafed branches swished the Toyota’s side windows on a tight bend after Tully.

Ernestine was big, with the high color of a carnivore, and her haunches strained a little against the capacity of her cream linen trousers in the confined space of the driver’s seat. Her mottled, fleshy arms were held tensely erect as she steered — she had learned to drive later in life. Kit, slightly the younger, was long-necked, tightly-permed, and thin as a cable. She had a darting glance that scanned the country they passed through, and by habit, she drew her companion’s attention to places and people of interest.

“Would they be hair extensions?” she wondered, as they passed a young blonde pushing a pram along the roadside verge.

“You can bet on it,” Ernestine said. “The way they’re streaked with that silvery-looking, kind of...”

“Cheap looking,” Kit said.

“Yes.”

“Gaudy!”

“A young mother,” Ernestine said.

“Got up like a tuppenny whore,” Kit said.

“The skirt’s barely down past her modesty. Are you watching?”

“I am watching. And that horrible, *horrible* stonewash denim!”

“Where would she be headed for, Kit?”

Kit consulted the road map.

“Leckaun is the next place along,” she said. “Only a stretch up the road from here. Her ladyship is headed into a pub, no doubt.”

“Drinking cider with fellas with earrings and tattoos,” Ernestine said. “In by a pool table. In a dank, old back room. Dank!”

“You can only imagine,” said Kit, and she made the sign of the cross. “A jukebox and beer barrels and cocaine in the toilets. The misfortunate infant left to its own devices.”

“Would we nearly stall for a while in Leckaun, Kit? See where it is the whore makes for?”

Kit pondered this a moment.

“Ah no,” she decided, “we’ll hit on for the castle. There’ll be a nice crowd there for sure.”

Onwards through the county the Toyota mildly sped, and the ladies had the windows buzzed down a little for breeze: It brought the medieval scent of old-growth woods. They had been on the road since early morning but there was no tiredness yet — the excitement of the outing countered that.

“A Cornetto would go down a treat,” Ernestine said.

“Ice cream weather most certainly,” Kit replied.

They turned to smile at each other. They hoped to have the need to buy ice creams soon enough, and more than two.

Castles were good. They found the car park to be almost entirely full. Ernestine maneuvered — after a couple of chubby attempts that brought sweat to her forehead — into the last available space. As the engine cut the car filled with the sound of anxious birds and the nearby chatter of the castle visitors. For a moment, the ladies pleasantly listened — they did love a summer afternoon crowd. The lake waters the castle kept guard of sat as heavily as the blue sky above; each was a suspension of the other.

“We’d chance a scone, Kit?”

“It would hardly put us in the ground, Ernestine.”

The coffee shop, too, was busy. Bored dads and tired mams lolled over gazpacho soup and tasteless sandwiches — there was organic cola and baked treats for the kiddies. Ernestine and Kit took their tolerated places in the

thick of it all. Often, in the quiet winter months, back in the bungalow, in the Midlands, they spoke of how it was they were perceived in the world. What were they taken for, they wondered, out there amid the light and gatherings of summer? Maiden aunts, they supposed, or a pair of nuns who had left — after some shabby soul-wrenching — their order, or maybe as discrete lesbians just a little too aged for openness. What was certain is they would be taken for gentle, kind souls, with their aunt-like smiles to seal the contrivance.

They nibbled hungrily as mice at the buttered fruit scones. The tea was left to brew until it was strong as ale. It was poured with satisfaction. They watched carefully the crowd at the cafeteria. They spoke wistfully of the little darlings who everywhere wobbled between the legs of tables and stumbled over shoulder bags left thoughtlessly on the floor — people just didn't think as to what might trip a child. The scones were about done with when Kit gobbled nervously along the length of her slender neck, and she reached a hand for Ernestine's.

“Look!”

Kit nodded sharply. It was a single hard gesture aimed at a little girl, almost albino pale. She wore sky blue shorts of a thin fleece material, silver-buckled sandals patterned with daisies, and a striped, armless French top.

“Oh an angel, Kit!”

“Hush!”

“Oh perfection.”

The girl was part of a family of four. The mother was as pale and fair-haired, a weary prettiness persisting into her late thirties. There was a brother, perhaps twice the girl's age, hunched over a hand-held video game — they heard at fifteen yards its *bleeps* and *kapows*. The father was sallow and dark-haired.

“Daddy's a greasy-looking Herbert,” Ernestine said.

“Would he be foreign?”

“Is the child nearly his at all, you'd wonder?”

“If 'tis, his blood is weak.”

“Might have a manner of a...Portuguese, have we?”

“And as sour-looking as it's greasy.”

Quiet outrage bubbled in their insides. Oh, the undeserving bastards who were blessed with the presence of angels.

“The mother is a liar,” Kit said.

“Would you read her so, Kit?”

“I would. She has a liar’s chin.”

They waited at distance for the family to finish up. They prayed that they had encountered them at the right time, that they were at the start and not the finish of their visit. They were rewarded when the family rose from the table and turned along into the castle. Instinct told them to follow. The family went dutifully through the cool hallways, drifted as though in a dream into the melt of visitors, there by the chain mail and the crests of arms and the dark stone walls.

The parents were not careful with the little girl. She roamed ten and twelve and fifteen feet away from them. And that could be enough, in the labyrinth of a castle, a place of quick turns and sudden twists, and the child was forgotten for a half-minute at a time, and that too could be enough.

Ernestine felt a slow hot flush creep her shoulders and ascend her neck.

Kit tinily, in the dry pit of her throat, made a cage bird’s excited trilling.

They followed the child — the albino sheen of her hair was a perfect tracer amid the crowd.

“Are you looking at the backs of her knees?” Ernestine whispered.

“How so?”

“I mean the little folds of flesh there, look? There’s still pup fat on her!”

“Ah there is. Ah sweetness!”

The family broke down into a spat. The father shouted at the little boy, who was showing great interest in his video game but none at all in heritage. The mother scolded the father for his shouting. The girl child in the old castle was forgotten.

“Move,” Kit said quietly.

Ernestine slipped a tube of wine gums from her bag, and as she moved, her smile was warmed by her desire to have the child’s heat — if briefly — in her life.

“I think I know your name, sweetie thing?”

The girl was perhaps twenty feet from her parents at this carefully chosen moment, but with their backs turned and the argument raging, that was as good as a mile. The girl repaid Ernestine’s fuzzy smile at once with a gap-toothed grin of her own.

“My name?”

“Oh I know your name for certain, I’d say! Would I have a little guess at it?”

The child giggled.

“I’d say your name could be written on one of these...”

She showed the sweets and popped one loose. She unwrapped it.

“Yes, yes,” she was beside the girl now, and she leaned in confidently, and she squinted hard at the wine gum in her hand. “It says here that your name is...Bob?”

The child laughed, and tossed her head to show the crooked milk teeth, and the white filmy ooze of babyhood that coated still her gums, and she coquettishly flicked her hair — she was surely no Bob — and, unseen, Kit circled and moved in behind her, paused for a check, and then moved closer. Still unknowing, the parents rowed with the boy, and with each other; still the angel was forgotten.

You might travel the length of Ireland for weeks on end, down all the great yawning of the summer days, and you would never come across the ideal moment. But sometimes the luck came in.

“Can’t be! Oh, it can’t be a Bob! Maybe you’re someone else altogether. Maybe I need to have a closer look now, my darling, and we’ll find out what your name is yet.”

Ernestine’s fingers trailed the filigree down of the child’s bare arm. The slightest of touches was electric and enough to distract her — her eyes became bloodshot — and Ernestine withdrew from it carefully. She shucked another wine gum free and examined it intently.

“Now it says here, we have a...is it a Kathy? An Aoife? Is it a Megan? Is it...”

She turned her head close to the child.

“Allie,” the child said.

“Oh baby Allie,” Ernestine said, and a tear came and ran slowly down her cheek.

Ernestine turned to see the parents and the brother still arguing, and she gave the girl the wine gum. Allie chewed on it. And Ernestine moved in and tickled her beneath the arm and sang:

“Allie’s so pretty, Allie’s so sweet, Allie is the little girl who’s walkin’ down your street...”

She raised her head and blinked her eyes rapidly then for her companion.

“Take her, Kit!”

At precisely this moment, as Kit took the little girl warmly inside a cuddle

that was also a lock, with her skinny forearm placed just so over the child's mouth, and as she lifted Allie high and close to her, and as Ernestine rose and pressed Kit on the small of the back, and hissed —

“Go! Go!”

— it was at this moment that Allie's brother drew her into the argument, he gestured in the direction of his sister — he knew her whereabouts by instinct — and he squealed at his parents that Allie was allowed to do as she pleased, that she was never forced to...

As he spoke, the boy and his parents naturally turned to look for Allie, and they saw her, in the distance, in the arms of the lady with the tight perm.

“Allie!”

The mother's desperate scream was signal enough for Kit to pinch viciously the pup fat at the back of Allie's knees, causing the child to shriek and cry.

“Oh hush, baby, hush! Oh look it, look it...is this your mammy now...is this mammykins?”

The mother fell drunkenly on her child, and Ernestine took the father's forearm.

“Oh thank God!” she said. “She was so upset! We were going for security! She thought she'd lost ye altogether.”

“Oh thank you so much,” said the father.

“Oh Allie, honey, shush!” cried the mother.

“Is that her name, is it Allie, isn't she some beauty?”

“Allie we were only over there! Sweetheart what is it?”

“Ah she couldn't see ye and the poor thing get herself all fussed.”

“Ah poor baby Allie.”

In a chorus of cooings the matter was smoothed over, and Ernestine and Kit were gratefully thanked for coming to the aid of a small child in distress. The family was left intact, with Allie still weeping, and the ladies moved on with fond smiles and waves. They turned at once for the car park. They made it only just in time. As the Toyota moved, the father dashed into the sightline of the rearview mirror — the angel had spoken — but he was too late, and if he got the reg it was no matter, for the plates were false, having been fixed that morning in the garage attached to the bungalow.

They sped twenty and thirty and forty kilometres beyond the speed limit through Sligo and into Leitrim and then Cavan. It was a useful tactic then to

drive into Northern Ireland, a separate jurisdiction, where again in the midst of a confusion crucial minutes might be gained — the ladies planned for failure as much as success, failure being the commonplace — and it was not until they had crossed the bridge that marks the border, where Blacklion gives way to Belcoo, that they permitted themselves speech again.

“I’ll tell you this much,” Ernestine said. “I would not like to see a read of my blood pressure right now.”

“It’d be crazy,” Kit scolded.

They drove on, and at length they settled to the miserable fact that the day was done for.

“As we’re on the road,” Kit said, “we could hit the Asda in Enniskillen and pick up some wine.”

The cheaper wines from north of the border would provide a small consolation when they returned, just the two of them, to the floral-patterned walls of the bungalow. It lay blamelessly behind a windbreak of pines — the trees created about the home an aura of gloom and silence. Birds did not nest in those trees ever.

Quickly, the Toyota was on the outskirts of Enniskillen, and traffic was heavy. A festival by the Erne drew crowds to its merries, and the air was thick with barbecue smoke that travelled over the water. The afternoon ascended to its peak; the heat was terrific. They saw a shaved-headed, shirtless man and his long, black-haired partner as they walked towards the carnival, with a small child between them, a little boy.

“Are you watching,” Ernestine said, “the creature with the head?”

“Would have the look of a soldier,” Kit said. “A squaddie.”

The Toyota stalled at traffic lights and the family passed directly in front. The ladies regarded each other dolefully.

“A fine environment for a child,” Ernestine said. “To be growing up in a house where the father has a pierced nipple.”

“The look of drink off him as well.”

“Oh it’s sweating out of his every pore, Kit!”

In truth, they weren’t too shy themselves with the New Zealand Cabernet Sauvignon, four pounds sterling the screwtop bottle. They went through it by the crate, with the radio set to Lyric FM, the classical station, and it played late, always, into the bungalow’s night, with Ernestine leafing through her power tool catalogues, and Kit with her small hours glaze and occasional trilling.

They went sulkily about the aisles of Asda. They filled a trolley with cheap white wine. They bought frozen mince from Lithuania in five-kilo packages.

They bought kitchen towels in the fattest available rolls, they went through such an amount of it. Tiredness caught up and carried age's taste.

Then their luck again turned.

As they neared, by fate, the customer services desk, an announcement was made that a toddler had been found, and might its parents approach at once, for the unnamed infant was panicked.

Boldly, the chance was taken.

"Oh my darling Allie!"

Ernestine at a dash reached the desk, and she flung herself on the child, and Kit was at her back, and she kept watch; she knew they had perhaps a minute, maximum, no matter how vast the Asda.

"Oh thank you so much!" Kit cried. "Oh thank you."

"Ah she's upset, she got a wee shock, a wee shock is all..." Ernestine soothed as the toddler continued to scream.

The customer services lady was delighted to have reunited the odd family.

"Allie, is that her name?" she said. "Pretty." And she was delighted to be rid of the screaming child, and she waved them along.

It was a monstrosly burbling infant they carried at pace across the car park — their trolley left in the aisle — and it was held in a firm lock by Kit's steel-wire arms. So quickly they were away, and Ernestine through the busy town gunned the Toyota.

Belcoo.

Blacklion.

Dromahair.

And now they began their descent to the Midland plain, and the toddler wailed itself to a state of purple exhaustion, and it was laid on the back seat.

Kit after a time turned and eyed it coldly.

"This is no angel," she said.

Ernestine consulted the rearview and tightened her lips in agreement.

"Is it not kind of...walleyed, Kit?"

"It is. And a jaundicey class of a look to it, I'd say. Once the purple clears."

On a straight stretch, Ernestine turned to give the child a more considered appraisal.

"I wouldn't think we'll be depriving the world of an Einstein," she said.

"No indeed."

"Bad blood, Kit."

"Sure what kind of parents? Can you imagine, Ernestine? What kind of parents would lose a child in an Asda?"

“Drunks and drug addicts and prostitutes,” Ernestine said.

“With tattoos on their backsides,” Kit said.

“It smells, Kit.”

“Oh, a smell that would knock you, Ernestine.”

“Look at the baby-gro!”

“It’s busting out of it.”

“Fattish alright. Being fed on white bread mulched down with milk and cane sugar.”

“Asda-bought, the baby-gro.”

“Oh, classy.”

“Could it be...”

“What, Kit?”

“Could it be an itinerant we have on our hands?”

“Oh Jesus Christ a tinker child!”

“Ernestine, what I’d say to you now...”

“I know, darling.”

“Do you?”

“You’re right, darling.”

“I am! The likes of this...*thing* isn’t worth the effort nor the risk.”

The decision was made. The Toyota pulled into a lay-by. The toddler was lifted by Kit from the back seat. It was taken across a ditch and left beneath hawthorn bushes — a kindness to give it shade from the sun that was hot still. The Toyota with relief departed the lay-by and headed for home, to the quiet bungalow surrounded by pines, the windbreak pines planted in the soft give of a bog that hid so efficiently.

Near the lay-by as the evening aged, the toddler sat silently beneath the hawthorn; it was stunned. It blinked against the midges that came up from the lake to feast on it but it had no strength left to cry. With interest, the toddler was watched by a pair of hooded crows, who stalked about importantly — like fascist birds, like jackboot gestapo — who waited on its final weakening, and for its sore eyes to sleepily close.