



The Leg

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On a crisp October Sunday morning, Dad still in bed, me and Mam got ready for the 10 o'clock Mass. Dad usually went to the big church in the town for midday Mass. Mam always took me with her.

She made sure I had washed properly, especially my neck and behind my ears. She licked her thumb to plaster down my cow's lick in the hallway. Just before we left to face the village. *'Sure what class of a mother would they think I am if I let you out in that state, hah? With your sticking up hair? Hmpfh!'*

I was in my Sunday best: new dark blue gabardine, short pants, grey school-approved socks, black leather shoes (a bit scuffed from football). I liked my new gabardine.

I had buttoned it right up against the cold (a habit now from being told every morning going to school; *'Button up your neck!'*).

At the church Mam, as usual, walked round to the right-side entrance, near the priest's house. Never the main entrance. Mam's three sisters usually joined us. There they were already: Auntie Maisie, Peggy and Molly. They edged towards us, soon chatting with Mam, all speaking in whispers, watchful for neighbours' chiding looks. It would not be proper for a scarfed mother to be gossiping in such a holy place.

Everyone thinks I'm only a child. But I know things. It wasn't enough to be holy, you had to be seen to be holy. Gossiping wasn't the picture of devoutness. Far from it.

'Isn't he a dote in the new gabardine, Mary?' they chimed to Mam like three little chirping birds singing in unison. *'You must be very proud, Mary girl. Sure he's only handsome!'*

I sat at the edge of the row while Mam caught up on the gossip. In the next row, an old man appeared the picture of devoutness: kneeling forward, bowed head, hands entwined around a rosary bead, cap protruding from his winter coat pocket, whispering his prayers.

I should be praying too, I thought. I wasn't interested in their gossipy talk. I kneeled down and joined my hands. I didn't know what to pray for. I looked around for something to get me started. One image caught my eye. I tried looking elsewhere but it was no use. It kept pulling me back like a magnet. I couldn't avoid it. An area of white skin, with a few hairs, on the back of the old man's right leg. Bordered by the hem of his grey trousers above and the just-visible top of his sock below. I was glued to the leg. I started counting the hairs.

Mam always said that I was a curious child, constantly asking her questions. *'Why, Mam, why?'*. Even when she held me in her lap I bombarded her with questions. If she didn't answer I would pull her face towards me and ask her the same question again. *'Jesus, that boy'll give me lockjaw!'*.

I counted all the hairs on the right leg. *'Would it be the same number on the left one?'* I wondered. I couldn't see that one. It was buried under the right leg. *If I pray to God maybe He'll get him to move his legs,* I thought. Then I could count the left leg hairs too.

I looked towards Mam and my aunts, happily sharing their gossip. I saw Mam had kept her bowed for a bit, eyes looking to the floor. Ahead of us I saw one of Dad's relations looking backwards. Aunt Imelda. Never liked her. A sourpuss. Never called her 'Auntie' only 'Aunt Imelda'. Always frowning. Never smiled. No time for children. *'Children should be seen and not heard'* she always said on her rare visits to see Dad. She never talked to Mam when she came. Never took the tea Mam offered. She was straining to look back at Mam and my aunts. She was three rows ahead but I heard her. *'Hmpfh!'*

An image flashed into my head: evening, Mam and Dad talking in the kitchen. The house quiet. I was meant to be sound asleep. But I was wide awake under the thin blankets. I heard Mam sob. Tip-toeing out on to the landing I heard the whole thing.

'I've never said a bad word against her Frank. I know she's your relative. I try to show respect. Even being friendly. But she snubs me, Frank. Every time. Once, a crowd of them were outside the church after Mass. Easter. They were talking about daffodils. I said 'aren't they lovely, daffodils?' Straight away she said: *'Sure, what would you know about daffodils? A country girl like you!'* Don't make me laugh!' I went red, Frank. I froze. *'Twas awful. She has no right. I know I don't have the education like some of them have. I had to leave school early. Sent to work for the sake of the family. We were poor Frank. You know. I had to do as I was told. The eldest had to show example to the younger ones. Do you not think I had dreams, Frank? I wanted to be a teacher when I was a wee girl. I would have been a good teacher, Frank. Never got the chance.'*

All I could hear from Dad was *'There, there Mary. It'll be alright'*.

As quickly as they came, these memories were emptied out of my mind. Suddenly I felt very hot. There was something rising inside me. I never felt this before. It didn't feel good. I was sweating like mad. Big huge drops on my forehead. Sweat pouring down my back. My shirt was stuck to me. Light-headed like the time I fainted in Sr. Margaret's High Babies class. I was going to be sick.

Mass hadn't started yet. Two altar boys, half-kneeling, half-sitting, chatted in whispers, waiting for the priest. *'Mam! Mam!'* was all I could say. Mam didn't respond. Didn't even turn towards me. She continued chatting, barely audibly, all four with their heads down, scarves tightly knotted at their chins. Like spies talking in code. I had no time for this now. I tried again to get Mam's attention. I even pulled on her sleeve. Finally she turned around. I was just about able to say: *'I'm gonna be sick, Mam!'*

'Yerra, wisht outa that!' was all she said. She wasn't going to do *anything*. *'I'm gonna choke'*, I thought. This thing inside me was about to burst. I couldn't hold it back.

Out it shot! Like lava from a volcano. I'd seen one once in a film put on by the Nuns at school. Mount Etna I think. Some of my lava went all down my lovely new gabardine but most of it landed on to the back of the legs of the man in the next row. *'I'm gonna faint like that time in school'*, I thought. I couldn't see the man's legs any longer cos they were covered by this stuff that I had just puked all over them.

Mam took notice now. The old man suddenly turned around. He looked so angry. His eyes were wide open. The whites of them could be seen all round. His mouth was open too. He looked like he was going to reach back into our row, grab me and beat the head off me.

Mam kept her eyes down. She wouldn't look directly at him. Grabbing me by the shoulder she pushed me quickly out of the seat. *'Sweet Jesus, Mary and Joseph!'* Neighbours were by now pouring in to the church. Mass was about to start. She didn't look at them either. She gave me what I knew as *the look*: a gritting of her teeth, as she turned her head briskly to one side, away from me. I knew it meant trouble *'wait till I get you home, me little maneen!'*

I felt awful for the poor man. But I didn't puke on him deliberately. I couldn't help it. And I did try to warn Mam that I was feeling sick. If she had taken notice then, got me out of the church, I could have been sick outside. That poor man would have been spared. And anyway, I was *still* feeling sick. Mam wasn't helping me one bit. She was more concerned about the showing up I had given her in front of everyone. She leaned closer to me: *'Lovely! Just what they want. Another thing they can use against me. Sure, we'll be the talk of the village now for a whole week. They'll never let me forget this one.'*

Outside in the cold air I felt less sick but I was still a bit woozy. I closed my eyes for few seconds. The world stopped spinning. *Thank God.* A cooling hand on my forehead. Nice. Not Mam's hand though. Then a voice: *'Ah, sure, the poor wee fellah'*. I knew that voice. Fr. Olga. Always dressed in his Franciscan holy garments. Sandals on his bare feet. Even in October.

The change in air from the church to outside triggered something. My stomach rumbled. Etna was on the march again. I opened my eyes. There was poor Fr. Olga. I couldn't see his bare feet. Buried under the lava. And it wasn't just his feet. His holy garments too were covered. No longer friar-brown but multi-coloured with orange and red bits, all held together by a large dollop of phlegm. And it stank.

Mam was beyond being embarrassed. She didn't know where to look. It was bad enough avoiding the looks of our neighbours earlier. But now her son had puked on the priest.

'So sorry father. I don't know what's come over him. Jesus, Mary and Joseph!'

The gabardine was destroyed. It stank. And there I was for all to look at.

Mam grabbed me by the right shoulder, trying to avoid the parts caked in puke.

A crowd was streaming in now through the side door. Mass was about to begin. Everybody stopped to gawp at the sick boy in the smelly, stained coat. I felt their eyes on me. But I heard some phrases spoken *'...poor*

misfortune... and *'...aw! The poor fella....'* Well, at least some of them felt sorry for me. More than I was feeling from Mam. More concerned about what the neighbours thought. As I stood there leaning against the church wall that night-time kitchen image returned.

Head down to avoid neighbours' looks, Mam dragged me down the church steps, across the street and down the hill. Soon we were at the gate of our house. As usual it creaked as she pushed it open. How I wished Dad had oiled that gate, as he had promised so many times. He came to the window, then quickly opened the door to us.

'Is Mass finished already? Was it that new young priest, was it? Sure, no sooner are you in, kneeling down with the cap on one knee, than he's passing out the hosts! Fierce fast altogether! Sure, he never gives much of a sermon like. Twenty minutes start to finish! So, 'twas him so, was it?'

How did Dad not smell the puke? Nor see the stains all over my new gabardine?

'Will you get yourself away from that door? Mam said to Dad. She gave him the look too. 'Or is it that you want the entire village to come out and see what a showing up your son has given me in front of the whole church this very morning?'

She dragged me outside to the yard, stripped me naked, told me to get in the zinc bath and give myself a good scrubbing. *'I suppose I'll have to boil this gabardine now'.*

The last thing I heard as I towelled myself dry was *'Lord Jesus Almighty! What a start to the Sunday. I suppose if I run I might just make the Consecration!'*