

## QUIZ NIGHT

Most places in the world have a particular centre of gravity to which the steps of inhabitants and visitors naturally turn. In Ireland, without doubt, it is the pub. The myth of the Irish pub has travelled the world, inextricably associated with notions of ‘the craic’: the traditions of an amorphous grouping of people who are expert at having a good time. This quest for ‘the craic’ began in a rural village situated on the River Shannon.

The village is a collection of townlands that are separated by generations of feuds. The original view may be one of a backward rural Irish village, of the kind often described as ‘unspoilt’ ‘picture postcard’. That the village remained on the surface unchanged was a matter of stubborn conservatism and resistance to change rather than tourist economics.

The main street is well defined by ‘the cross’, the meeting of the roads. The drive is taken between the ditches. But more important than the religious symbolism of ‘the cross’ is the number of pubs: a sign of village prestige. A generation of men still reconstruct the legendary pub-crawls at sunrise, a memory to the time when the village had ten pubs that stretched along the Main Street. But now, the walk down the Main Street of the village is taken past the derelict buildings lining the road, wide display windows boarded, reflected abandoned pubs converted into abandoned residences.

The lone village pub was located on the Main Street. The door long gone, a testament to the long forgotten statutory post-closing lock-ins, revealed a narrow side alley made darker by the addition of 1930s dark wooden panelled walls, well stained by nicotine. Stepping across the threshold, I entered the darkened general store. The only light reflected the cross onto a portrait of Jesus. The shelves displayed farm fresh eggs in a range of differently labelled boxes, bread warmed by an insidious growth of green and pink mould, a selection of marmalade and jams of non-shop manufactured concoctions that jostled with a confused array of brightly coloured confectionary and fizzy drinks. But the thing that smacks

you between the nostrils as you walk in is the fusty, fungal smell, a pervasive lingering smell. This is not the smell of stale cigarettes. All the smokers had, under the decree of statutory health and safety law, congregated outside. No, enlightenment came by way of the Landlord himself, resenting the need for an explanation, or even justification: “there’s a problem with them septic tank pipes, by Jezus, I’ll not close for any smell.” And on reflection, before I had time to comment: “yeah, just mind the feckin toilets, its no smoking so, but no messing with them ashtrays there, they make grand air fresheners do them cigarette stubs.” Apparently it is cheaper to be charged for the appearance of allowing smoking on the premises then to fix the faulty septic tank pipes that run under the floor of the pub.

Joining the pub side, the locals, with keen anthropological interest, are transfixed by the German man who is equally mesmerised by the man wearing the colours (yellow and blue) of the Banner County playing the spoons: traditional Irish spoons the German has been informed in whispered tones. It was abundantly clear by anyone remotely interested that the German had come to revel in the atmosphere of kitsch Irish tradition. The spoon playing local flung his head back, eyes closed, mind oblivious to all thought beyond the rhythmic clanging of the spoons, had, for the first time in his playing career, an audience. There’s a big cheer when he finishes, but not, it is feared, for the reasons he thinks. And into the interlude, the German, his accented English loud and precise, in the manner of a man who isn’t comfortable with his English, but with the gall of a village outsider: “I know it’s a gay pub, but I’d like to bring my wife, she would like to experience.”

Having snorted, the Landlord, already on his dignity, then spoke: “this has always been a men only pub, women stay on the shop side, behind the shop counter, they are served from there.”

The dullest eye could have perceived the delicacy of the position. The crowded pub preserved their poise, paused, and laughed.

“Drinks in before we start.” My order of a glass of red wine was served, the small 75cl bottle of red wine being slapped down in front of me. “Glass?” As the barman tips the dregs of something from a glass, dexterously managing to preserve the ice cubes within by

judicious use of manure-encrusted hands, proffering the glass for my use. Who needs a glass?

Quiz night tonight, fundraising for the Irish Country Woman's Association, I am informed as I'm waved into a team: "I always lose if it's for charity," the team leader confidently informs me. Reassured that the first prize was mine for the asking and about to take a seat on the bench running the wall, I am instead advised to take a stool. On closer inspection, the bench revealed more grikes than the limestone paving of the floor and it is then that I realise the majority of the crowd are jumper-less, having utilised their clothing to pad-out the undulating crevices.

The village relocated within the confines of the pub and grocery store, an assortment of prizes piled high on the pool table, all present were confirmed to be in a team, with a screech of the microphone, the questions began:

"What is a fascinator?"

"It's a corset."

"Go on so, it means hats, 10 Euros we're right."

"Ar sure, its one of them women things, your on."

"What are ya? Women things? That's vag-jewels, that is."

"Just write your answer on the team sheet for marking," "Next question ..."

"Name the flower that represents Wales?"

"It's that vegetable."

"Leek, I've got it ... it's a leek, leek."

"Tell all why don't ye?"

"Aye, right enough, right enough."

"Moving on ..."

My team rallied quickly and went with the pub consensus on all questions in round one. It wasn't until the results for round one were posted that the team realised that we were bottom of the scoreboard. No longer did we seek counsel from the pub.

Lowering his voice, it was revealed that the team next to us spent the day rehearsing for the big night, trawling the newspapers and listening to the radio stations (each member being allocated to different radio stations and newspapers) making reference to the local columns, absorbing all facts. With growing dismay, the team next to us manoeuvred their score pad out of sight: the slanderous injustice.

“yer pulling me leg,”

“I’m doing nothing of the kind. I am telling ye precisely what happens.”

“well, excuse me for not doing the homework,”

“I do be thinking we’ve had it, ye know it.”

With some animation and not missing any opportunity wrong suggestions were shouted out with the freedom and the conviviality of the inebriated. Though with limited success, possibly this was hampered by the slurring and laughter.

Exhausted, in the aftermath of failure, bottom to the end, the team departed after the final round in time to view the sunrise, bidding the other goodnight till tomorrow. Drunk, we valiantly walked a straight line, acknowledging the wisdom of past builders who constructed the Main Street arrow straight and bordered by terraced cottages. To a person, all had legs and therefore dignity, as each palmed the terraced cottage line home.