

## Waiting for Gaudiya

The bus trundled along, carting her weight on the top deck through the suburban estates, making her feel like a loosely-tied sack of comestibles. She had decided to wear her light blue dress to bring some sky into her life, some postcard blue sky, not the variegated nuances of grey that passed for a sky in this place—a country whose ceaselessly changing weather made you feel unsure about yourself, as if you didn't know whether you were coming or going, your shadow vacillating from one moment to the next, appearing and disappearing as the sun briefly seeped through a rent in the cloud mass, only to be smothered a few moments later by another thick swath of cloud.

An attractive-looking man on an antiquated bicycle passed by down below, labouring his way up the hill, also apparently on his way into town. He was riding the type of highly perched, one-gear bicycle of yore, not quite the Penny Farthing but the kind you called a High Nelly. Or was it Hi, Nelly. She wondered about that for a moment.

The bicycle held her attention because it was the exact colour of the worn-out, red, double-decker bus. It was also that the man striding atop it seemed somehow out of it all, his mind up in the clouds. Despite the effort of riding up the hill, you could see him visibly smiling into the wind, his eyes almost closed. His mien made him seem somehow different to the average. He seemed to have a sort of dreamy attentiveness to the beauty of the quarks as they fall.

Men were such a mystery, so intractable, both easy and impossible to comprehend. This one seemed like the type she might have liked in different circumstances, but how could you know, judging from just a face turned skyward and the old-fashioned shape of a bicycle.

Besides, he was gone, practically out of sight now. She had to strain her neck to watch him still labouring on the bicycle in the distance. The bus had passed him by and there was no way of knowing where he would stop in town, or even if he was really heading there. She could always wait for him at the next bus stop, but it would be awkward to come up and try to stop him on his bike in the middle of the road to ask for directions when there were crowds on foot milling around the footpaths. It would just seem too obvious, and anyway, her heart was already taken, even if there wasn't much hope.

It drizzled most of the time in these parts, but it didn't exactly rain men, not the right kind of men. There wasn't a single male in her circle of friends or acquaintances that she even vaguely fancied, if you took Father Collins out of the equation. And her friends couldn't relate to a priest as a flesh and blood masculine human being.

Even she was never quite sure if the intensity in Father Collins's eyes was meant for her or if it was just God radiating outwards from inside him.

He was the only priest she knew who had any intensity about him. All the others seemed dull as ditch water, with no more inspiration left in them than tuneful melodies in a stone-dead songbird.

But for Father Collins, it was otherwise: his words were possessed of a kind of radiant vitality. His voice seemed to her a reed-filtered wind instrument, blown from inside by divine afflatus, swept from the start of the sermon to the end of the mass by a swell of faith that never failed to give the congregation its weekly Sunday thrill. His orations seemed to flood the cathedral with balminess, the nave awash with his words in the stained-glass light, the pulpit afloat on the wavelengths of his voice.

She had realized a few months ago that she was in love with him. But of course he was so out of reach. She didn't even know his Christian name. And besides, who would be foolish enough to fall for a priest? She had told herself a thousand times it was out of the question. It just couldn't be done. The very idea was risible. Had she told them, her friends would have burst out laughing. They would have stared at her in utter disbelief. *Father Collins! Are ya crazy?! Are ya out of yer mind?* They would have asked her if she was ready to face the spiritual consequences of defrocking a priest.

*Defrocking* had always struck her as a cartoonish sort of word. You could picture a priest being thrown out in the rain in his underpants, his cassock torn off his body, his dog collar still hanging half undone like a loosened noose around his neck.

She pondered the new scenario that had been evolving in her mind. It was of course ludicrous, infeasible. Father Collins didn't look like the kind of priest who would engage in hanky-panky on the side, not that that was what she was looking for.

Besides, she wasn't exactly what most people would call gorgeous, or virginal. How could she, of all people, expect to entice someone of Father Collins's social and religious standing.

She got off the bus all astir, her heart thumping and fluttering, her legs all cottony from thinking. She sensed she could wobble and fall over with the merest push of the crowd.

Before her lay the winding length of Patrick Street. What was locally known as *de Statcha* gazed stonily down at her. She thought back for an instant to the young man on the bike and let it go. It didn't seem worth pursuing, and it didn't look as if he was about to make an appearance any time soon.

Besides, the unreasonable idea that had grown in her mind all week was sweeping everything rational in its wake, like a minor tsunami pouring its wreckage, its flotsam and jetsam, in a rapid flow of water-driven debris down the runway of the city's thoroughfare.

The notion of sin had been worming its way through her mind like an extraneous vein. Driving a Catholic priest away from his sacred vows was considered a grave religious crime.

And yet, it seemed the only thing left for her to do. It wasn't just that he was the only physically attractive man she knew, there was more to it than that. He was the only person who could make her feel the presence, the only one who made life seem holy and radiant. His faith was so strong you could feel the substance of God shimmer all around him. He inhabited belief like a garment. His boyish smile, his fire-black eyes, his warm bedside manner, the way his spirit seemed to dance during his sermons.

When she heard him speak, whenever her eyes encountered the glow of his gaze, the cold absence of God by her side lifted momentarily. For a whole hour or more, after a service or confession, she could feel a tingling, lingering joy in her chest, a sensation that seemed to irrigate her like insinuating channels of blood.

She had to try. It seemed like an impossibility not to at least attempt something, or she would die of loneliness. She had steeled herself all week to go through with the plan, despite the fact that it was of course doomed to fail. How could she of all women succeed in taking Father Collins away from his God and his fervour, even for a moment?

Her footsteps echoed slightly as she made her way towards the stone-grey church where Father Collins officiated on Saturdays. She liked the church, despite the fact that it reminded her of a neo-Gothic bunker, its massive slabs of rock, its thick, dense spires making it look more like a defence against aerial attack than anything else. And yet its situation near the arching bridge and its under-flowing grey waters lent the chunky, pointed edifice a certain liquid lightness.

She pushed the soundproofed wooden door that let into the darkness. The musty smell of churchiness entered her, the cool interior temperature instantly relieving her skin of its sweat.

There was the usual queue of believers waiting in the aisle. She made a quick bow, a semi-penitent sign of the cross, hardly daring to touch her forehead or her chest lest the tips of her fingers consign her to the flames. She took her place in the queue and waited her turn.

The young man's muscles ached as he pushed up Shandon Street. He had to return a video cassette Gavin had given him and asked him so many times to return. Well, he was finally doing it now. He got off in mid-stride to push the bicycle.

Hearing no response on the inside to his knocking on the freshly-painted door, he figured there was nobody inside. The letter slot in the door looked about the size of the VHS cassette so he took it out of the plastic bag on the carrier and forced it through the hole.

The cassette bounced harmlessly onto the stretch of patterned carpeting and fell on its side. It would look a bit rude without a note, but at least he had fulfilled his duty. It was done now and Gavin could stop complaining.

He freewheeled through the sloping backstreets and then abruptly down a short lane that was as steep as a black-coded slope in an Alpine resort, his legs locked in the clownish position required by

the pedal-brake. He barely managed to grind the old bike to a halt as a speeding Fort Fiesta zoomed in front of him, wailing its horn in dismay, wobble-swerving to avoid him. He pictured himself as a mangled corpse dripping off the railing of the annexe to the School of Music.

His heart thumping almost painfully in his chest, he eased himself slowly down the incline towards the humped back of the main city bridge. Staring up at the tops of the Patrick Street buildings, the dome of the stately Roches Stores, decrepit paint flaking off the filth-coloured façades, he heard a distant chanting sound accompanied by a jingle of bells.

A group of Hare Krishna skinheads was parading in the middle of the street, seemingly oblivious to everything around them, as if even the cars weren't there. He put his foot down on the road. As they were passing, one of the members of the group turned his head to gaze at him. He left the parade and came up. Gabriel decided it was a young woman, though the shaved head had dramatically increased her androgyny.

'Would ya like some Food for Life?' she enquired, pursing her lips seductively around the f sound. 'We'll be distributing Indjan grub in aboutt an hour.'

The young woman's bold, unblinking stare suggested she wasn't going to take anything non-committal for an answer. He dithered for an instant, smiled and accepted the offer. Why not try something out of the ordinary, after all?

A slightly sardonic smile flickered at the edge of her lips: 'Don't worry yerself. We're nut cannibals or enting'. She laughed. 'You can come along for a sing. We'll just be doing a spott of bhakti yoga. We'll chant a few mantras and den serve up Food for Life. I swear to ya, de food is juss gorgeous.'

She took him by the hand, pulling him onto the tail end of the parade. He followed them across the bridge, along the docks, feeling a bit of a fool all the while, pushing his old banger of a red bike like a worn-out holy cow by his side in the midst of the chanting.

Presently, the group took a sharp turn up towards the hilly parts of the city where a tightly-packed cluster of smarty-coloured houses and back lanes awaited. The chanting ceased abruptly as they halted in front of a rickety-looking door and the bald-headed young woman who had accosted him said to what seemed the leader of the group, 'Jason, I've invited—whass yer name?'

'Gabriel', he said, feeling sheepish.

'Gabriel', she pursued, 'he'd like a taste of Gaudiya'.

This Jason guy was around the same age as Gabriel, perhaps a few years older. The deep paleness of his skin made his face look prematurely aged. He looked as if all the fat had been sucked out of his body, his only spot of colour coming from deep-red freckles that reminded Gabriel vaguely of blood spatter. The man's pale eyes were practically colourless. Although he seemed calm, something about the stony look in his eye gave Gabriel the impression the guy had a propensity for violence.

Gabriel followed the group of Hare Krishna up the dark winding staircase, his feet bumping into the raisers as the steps got shorter in the winding parts of the stairwell. They stopped in front of a tiny door you had to lower your head and shoulders to get through.

Dropping their bags in the hallway, they entered a room. Without a word, they sat in a circle, immediately crossing their legs into the lotus position. He followed suit, twisting his legs into a fair imitation of the lotus, trying to imitate the mudra finger shapes they adopted, the thumb and middle finger almost touching, palms turned upwards on his knees.

Presently, they began to chant the mantra they had been singing in the street with the same pitch and volume, the limited confines of the room lending it a kind of hypnotic intensity. He sang along with the other chanters. *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Hare Rama*. Within seconds, the endlessly-repeated litany teased him out of thought again.

When the singing finally ceased, he was light as a buoy of bobbing balsa on the surface of a pond. His ringing ears felt compressed with the sudden intensity of the silence in the room. The young woman who had addressed him in the street turned her head and said, 'Krishna followers adhere ta four regulative principles, by de way, Gabriel, but we only stick ta tree of dum'.

He nodded bemusedly, waiting for her to enlighten him, but she didn't seem to feel the necessity to do so. At some unseen signal, she and a number of other helpers rose to their feet and left the room.

They came back with platefuls of veggie balls covered in a strange-looking, light-green powder that made them look faintly ethereal, like magical play food. Gabriel was offered a plate and the others all took a plate and proceeded to lift the food to their lips with their fingers. He tried one of the phosphorescent green balls and found it was delicious, tastier than anything he had ever tried before. He finished his plateful faster than anyone else in the circle, feeling a bit embarrassed when he realized he'd hogged it down.

When they had finished eating and the plates were stacked away, the group resumed their Oriental chanting for the third time in his presence.

It seemed so rude to just get up and leave after the meal that he could only but comply in the after-dinner ritual of endless Hare Rama dessert. He didn't want to seem ungrateful so he just sat there, mouthing the words, chewing the syllables, pouring the sounds as loudly as he could.

The chant got louder and louder until it reached a plateau of sound. Gabriel began to feel a strange sort of drowsiness. Not just the kind he typically felt after dinner but a different heavy-headed, knockout kind of weight in his skull. He put it down to the hypnotic mindlessness of the mantra, but then he thought it couldn't be just that.

He stopped singing, looking around him at the faces to see if what he was feeling was normal, but they were all lost in the chant, eyelids lowered, so enthralled by the singing that the veins showed starkly on their necks.

He tried to get up but found that moving his muscles was beyond his power. He looked towards the man called Jason, remembering with a faint shot of panic that he reminded him of an IRA diehard he had seen in a film. The callous one who sets fire to the friendly prison warden, his features as pitiless as those of a crocodile. *What was the name of that film?*

Then his panic turned to a carefree fuzzy feeling and the chanting around him seemed to carry him like gently oozing waves, pushing him further and further away from the shore. He felt his vision darkening, his head sinking slowly down to his chest, as if his neck were melting into his torso.

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She sat in the semi-darkness afforded by the oratory. Just two penitents left in front of her in the queue. Soon it would be her turn and she would have to muster the courage to pronounce the words that she was going to utter. Why had she chosen to confront him in the confessional, of all places, a place where you were supposed to repent for your sins, not commit them? What would she say to him? Bless me Father, for I am about to sin?

Would he sit in silence and not know what to say, lost for words for the first time in his life? Would he have her cast out of the church?

It seemed impossible to tell him to his face in the open light, without the darkened seclusion offered by the enclosure of the booth.

The green light on the confessional lit up and another penitent parted the narrow strips of curtain, disappearing into the booth.

Somehow most of Father Collins's penitents happened to be women. In all probability, she wasn't the only woman in Cork harbouring such thoughts. But in all likelihood she was the only one to consider acting on her impulses.

With a sinking sensation in her chest, Deirdre watched the woman exiting the booth. The red light flicked to green and the last devotee in front of her got up to go in. The lights always made her feel as if she was waiting at a kind of spiritualized pedestrian crossing. She felt like a lost soul waiting on the banks of the Styx.

Her palms twitched and she tried to wipe the perspiration off on the reassuring wood of the chair, keeping her eye trained on the red electric bulb and its promise of hell.

Her thoughts suddenly turned to the three principles that the nuns in her girls' school had taught her: *Contrition, Disclosure and Penance*. She was about to cut to the chase, jettisoning both contrition and penance.

The last confessed woman exited the booth, but the light lingered on red for a few interminable seconds before switching to green.

Deirdre was up like a shot, but quickly arrested her movement so as not to alert anyone around to the nature of her intentions.

Parting the thin curtains, she settled herself down on the kneeler, trying to make out the figure behind the lattice. A bolt of fear ran round in circles in the closed circuit of her mind. It suddenly occurred to her that the confessor on duty might not actually be Father Collins. Although it was his day, it sometimes happened that he was absent and replaced. It had surprised her once before.

Shrouded in darkness, the veiled figure behind the grid sat without talking. Most of the priests did this. They waited for the penitent to pronounce the first words.

She said nothing, sitting there listening to the sound of the man's breath, wondering if she could guess from the quality of his breathing if it was Father Collins or someone else. She decided to wait for her heartbeat to settle, for the priest to make himself known.

A polite throat-clearing came from the other side. It could be him, but there was no way of knowing from the sound with absolute certainty. The small abstract lozenges of skin she could make out behind the anonymizing lattice could belong to anyone's face. She didn't know how to start, how to make him say something.

Finally, she blurted out 'Bless me, Father... Is that... you, Father Collins?'

Another brief, throat-clearing sound was heard from the other side of the latticework.

'I—' She hesitated, emotion balling up in her throat. 'I'm ... about to commit a sin, Father. I do not know if you'd consider it a venial or a mortal one...'

Her voice trailed off into nothingness. She lowered her head and her eyes came to rest on the Act of Contrition embroidered on the *prie-dieu* cushion under her knees. She proceeded with some agitation, her fingers kneading the woodwork in front of her like recalcitrant dough.

'I ...ll be brief.' She swallowed. 'Over the last two months, I've come to realize that ... that I'm ... this is very hard to admit... Anyway ... here it is. I've ... realized that I'm actually ... in love with you, Father Collins. Please don't say anything yet. I know it sounds crazy, but it isn't just because you're so kind and eloquent. It's because I ... only feel God's presence when you're around me.'

She imagined him blinking in consternation behind the latticework. She couldn't hear his breath.

'I *know* it sounds terrible,' she pursued, her heart hammering in her head, 'you being a priest and all, but I keep thinking that I would like to ... have ... an affair with you'.

She had said it. She had said what she had come to say. The words were out, though probably not exactly the right ones. *Affair* was so awkward, pedestrian, vulgar. So laughable. Why had she chosen that word on the spur of the moment, of all the words available? She couldn't imagine a worse word, now that it was uttered. It was as if she had branded herself a harlot in public, in a church of all places.

She placed a hand on the grid between them, the red light filtering through the curtains tainting her fingers lugubriously.

The silence behind the screen was so dense it felt like there was no-one left in the cubicle. She pictured Father Collins sitting as stiff as a mouse anticipating attack from a snake. Then she heard a slow in-take of breath. Several breaths, so deep and laboured she wondered for an instant if he wasn't masturbating in the cubicle.

But then he spoke the words, the timbre of his voice altered to a short, breathy nervousness.

'You ... must understand that I act in this confessional *in persona Christi*.'

Deirdre felt a surge of shame well up like muddy blood in her face. She had disgraced herself, trying to incite a priest to break his vows in the most sacred of places.

'I'm sorry', she said in a strained voice, 'I ... won't bother you with this again'.

She began to get up off her knees.

'Wait ... Deirdre. It's *you*, isn't it? Let me ... think ... for a second ... Listen ... I think we should meet. Let's say ... this evening at ten ... At the dock. We can speak there at liberty. By the last pier ... pier number six. I might be a little late after vespers, but ten o'clock should give me enough time.'

When Gabriel awoke in the darkness, there was no-one around. His hands weren't tied. He wasn't blindfolded either. He was lying on a thin mattress in an empty room. A ray of moonlight was slitting the carpeting by his side.

He listened for sounds coming from adjacent rooms as he lay there, still as a mouse. But there was nothing. No whispering, no muted steps.

He peered closely at his watch to try and see if he could make out the time it was. With a slight shock he realized he had been unconscious all day. That is if this was still Saturday. Perhaps he had been here for days without knowing it, fed intravenously.

He got to his feet, feeling queasy and unstable, but able to move. Patting the wall with his palm, he fumbled a little at the door in an attempt to find the handle. It met his groping fingers and opened outward without a struggle. The rest of the apartment was cast in greater darkness, some of the rooms not having windows.

To his left, Gabriel could vaguely make out the room where they had chanted and eaten of the Gaudiya. What had been in that? It must have been a pretty potent drug. Had it been mixed into the green floury batter? He had never passed out like that before.

He slid his slightly numbed hands along the rough surface of the wall towards what seemed like the front door. Fumbling for a switch, he flipped on the current. The outsized lightbulb pinged on and off in brief spurts. It was out again for over five seconds. It flickered more quickly, sizzled, went ping! and stayed lit.

There was an envelope on the mat. Inscribed in large letters, it said OPEN ME.

He took out the note and read

*Hey there Gabriel!*

*Sorry to leave you with just the message. We had to leave for Limerick late in the afternoon for awareness-building. (Something we'd planned for weeks – sorry I forgot to mention it.) You were sleeping like a baby. We didn't want to disturb you.*

*I guess you might be a bit pissed off at us for spiking your food. We thought you needed a little loosening out. I'm afraid we put powdered opium in your Gaudiya. We weren't expecting you to pass out so quickly though! Anyway, I must say you look very relaxed in your sleep. You looked like you needed a break from reality.*

*If you can forgive me, it would be nice to see you again. We'll be back sometime next week, same place, if you want to meet us in the street.*

*Love, Anna*

At the bottom of the page it said NAMA OM KAR, whatever that meant.

Gabriel crumpled the page and stuffed it furiously into his pocket.

His bicycle was where he had left it. Thanks be to fucking Krishna for that.

Mounting his steed, he freewheeled down through the dark maze of the city. He swerved down towards the piers, circling in on the dock with its garish glow-in-the-dark arrowheads that had been put up because a father and child had missed the hairpin bend and spun soundlessly into the waters to drown.

The large number stood out over the pier, lit up by the red and green lights of the harbour. A little further down below the pier, where the mud-bathed kelp sent up its almost pleasant stench, he saw a couple embracing in the dark. A woman in a light blue dress holding on to a man in a black cassock. Welded together, they were as motionless as the jutting poles of the wharf.

As he made his way past the last houses on Western Road, it began to rain, lightly at first and then in heavier quantities. Bracing himself with his head pushed into his shoulders, he became resigned to the idea of being drenched.

Pushing his head back to let his face receive the pelting drops, he opened his mouth to the manna. Tiny pellets of sky water began slapping his tongue.

Although they had no doubt taken shelter by now, he imagined the couple under the quay glued to each other with rain, showered in the down-pouring water, their clothes dripping off them like a mass of tangled spindrift.

Then he thought back over the events of the day and laughed in the rain. Perhaps after all he would try to meet her again. That Anna. There was something about her. Something special in her eyes. A good smile, and she had managed to take him out of himself for a day. She had plucked him off the treadmill. And that was worth a lot.