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Issue 4 – May 2007

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Some really good sins

by Sean McLaughlan

When Ah wis wee ma teacher asked oor class wan mornin tae make up a 'little pretend sin' fur when the priest came tae class that afternoon. She sayd he wis comin tae help us practice fur wir First Holy Confession. Well Ah put ma hand up and told her Ah didnae need tae make up a sin because Ah hid seen some really good wans.

Ah wis only a wee guy about seven, in the Primary school when 'ese sins happened. Ah'm nearly eleven noo.

It wis at the back o the auwl haunted church. Naebody Ah hid ever knew hid been tae the auwl haunted church tae pray; it had always been locked up since Ah could remember. It wis smelly and fallin doon and pretty scary at night, but it did hiv wan good thing goin for it - it used tae hiv a big massive puddle at the back when it rained.

The puddle wis like about four buses wide and dedd deep in the middle. Ah used tae love big puddles when Ah wis a wee guy.

Tae get tae the puddle ye hid tae go roon the backa the church. Ye hid tae squeeze through the railins at the front, en walk roon and doon the side o the church. The lane doon the side wis full o auwl broken green and clear glass bottles. Ah think some boys used tae smash bottles but Ah don't know who it wis that done that.

At the back o the church wis where the big puddle wis, it wis a big car park sized puddle at the back " nae grown-ups ever went ere anymerr, only boys. Ah hid heard aboot it because o ma big cousin John. John wis ten en and he knew all the best places tae go.

Ma big cousin John is magic, he's dedd brave. He let me put on his new Celtic tap all afternoon wance and he never even asked for it back and never told anybody it wisnae mine. He wis never nasty tae me when Ah wis wee. Even though he could hiv been, because he wis ten and he wis bigger than me 'en.

Ah went tae the puddle wi ma mate Paul McEwan, who wis ma mate en, that day. Ah knew ma big cousin John would be ere and Ah knew the puddle wid tae because it hid been rainin awnight and Ah hid been told no tae go oot if Ah didnae put on ma wellies, and tae 'stay away fae puddles'. Ma Dad sayd tae ma mam, 'Puddles tae wee boys are like, African wattering holes are tae wild animals'. Ma dad always watches documentaries on the telly.

Every wee boy from oor street and streets round aboot oors hid decided tae play at the giant puddle behind the haunted church at day.

For the boys that liked tae play in the mud there wis a big muddy bit tae play. Fur the boys that liked tae build hings ye could put lemonade crates and half bricks thetether tae make wee bridges over and aroon the puddle wi planks. There wis even a broken drain tae put big poles doon if ye wanted. If ye flung a big stone in it jist disappeared " really. The only hing wis as soon as we got tae the puddle Ah wanted tae go hame again.

The Baileys: Roy, Stewart and Phillip wir over the other side o the puddle. They went to the Prodisent school. Ah hated em. They wir tramps. They always wore their school uniform oot tae play at night and they didnae hiv any good gear tae wear. Stewart Bailey hardly hid shoelaces in his shoes, he jist hid wee bits left tae keep his shoes on. Ah even seen a bit o Phillip Bailey's bum wance because he had a hole in his trousers and ye could tell that he didnae hiv any underpants on. They used tae wear grey school jumpers all the time, even oot playin!

They hid a big Alasation dug wi them an they wir already throwin bricks and splashin people. Ah could hear them askin people if they wir Cathlick or Prodisent. Ye hid tae say ye wur a Prodisent because if ye sayd ye wir a Cathlick they sayd, 'Well ye better get baptised en.' And then they would jist start kickin big sprays a watter over ye, pure soakin ye. Ah hated em.

Their dug wis runnin aroon demented aswell and ma fether had always says that that family shouldnae be allowed dugs because, 'they Baileys drove the dugs they hid demented because they didnae feed them'. Ma dad wis right. The dug the Baileys hid did looked demented. It looked all starvin and skinny. Its big tongue wis hingin oot, sleverin all over the place and it wis pure jumpin up on people. Ah wis scared o it so Ah wis.

Ah says tae McEwan, 'C'mon go'. But McEwan sayd jist tae ignore em and no tae talk tae em, even if they called ye names or asked ye if ye wir a Cathlick.

McEwan saw John so we went tae his part o the puddle and asked him whit he wis playin at and could we get a game?

John and his mate wir playin hit the bottle. Him and his pal, wee Peter Farr, who stayed next door tae John and wis the same age as him, hid been throwin rocks and stones at this glass lemonade bottle that they hid flung into the deep end o the puddle. The winner wis goinae be the best aimer and they said that we could hiv

a shot efter em. It wis a great laugh fur a while, Ah nearly hit it two or three times. John hit it but it didnae smash. But en the Baileys started comin nearer an throwin stone at the bottle tae, no wee wans like we wir, but big half bricks and they started tae soak us tae. They wir daen it on purpose.

They threw a big stick and it pure splashed and the Alasation ran right by me and Ah screamed because Ah thought it wis goinae go fur me and they all laughed and sayd, 'It's no goinae touch ye'. But it wis. Ma big cousin John sayd, 'Whit are you laughin at? He's only a wee guy'. And they all came over and Ah jist wanted tae go hame.

They were goinae soak John, Ah could tell, but jist as they wir goinae push John intae the puddle the youngest wan, Roy, he started laughin because their Alasation wis daein a number two on a wee bit a grass beside the railins and so they all started laughin. But then they decided that they wurnae goinae throw John in the puddle and they said that if John didnae sit on the Alasation's jobbie they were goinae batter him. Ah sayd, 'Mon go John.' But the oldest wan Phillip, he wis thirteen, he grabbed me and picked me up and said if John didnae sit on the jobbie they wir goinae put me on it. Ah wis greetin noo and Ah noticed that McEwan wis merr standin on their side, as if he wisnae way us and Peter Farr hid ran away as soon as they'd come over.

John sayd he wisnae daen it and he sayd they better put me doon because Ah hid a big brother at eighteen (but Ah didnae) and that if they didnae put me doon he would go and get ma big brother tae batter them. But they knew Ah didnae hiv a big brother at eighteen and they asked, 'Well whit's his name en?' But John didnae hiv time tae answer because jist en the middle wan o the Baileys, Stewart, he picked up a bit o the jobbie on a stick and wis comin at John wi it.

All the boys who wir playin roon the puddle wir runnin behind Stewart Bailey watchin tae see if Stewart Bailey wis goinae put dog jobbie on John an waitin tae see whit John wis goinae dae aboot it. But John jist ran away from Stewart and so Stewart came over tae me and put a stripe of jobbie doon ma face and en Ah wis really greetin.

So would you be greetin but if you were a wee guy and they done it tae you. The jobbie wis pure stinkin. John helped me but.

John aimed a big brick at the Baileys from a bit away and says again that they better let me go or he wis goinae get ma dad.

They let me go cause Ah wis greetin so much and they said they were only kiddin and that Ah should stop bubblin. But they sayd that they wir goinae batter John when they got a hawd o him. They told John tae beat it from the puddle and started flinging big stones at him Phillip Bailey started chasin him and so he ran away.

Ah started walkin doon the lane oot o the haunted church and Ah could hear Stewart Bailey laughin and callin me shitey. He wis pure sayin Ah wis a wee wean for greetin, but Ah jist turned roon and shouted at him, 'WELL AT LEAST AH'M NO THE WAN WI HOLES IN MA TROUSERS WHERE YE CAN PURE SEE YER BUM CAUSE YE'VE GOT NAE UNDERPANTS ON. AND AH DON'T WEAR MA SCHOOL UNIFORM OOT TAE PLAY.'

Then he started chasin me so a squeezed oot the front gate of the church and Ah sprinted awae. Stewart Bailey gied up chasin me because Ah'm a fast runner if Ah want tae be.

McEwan chased efter me all the way tae ma Close and put his erm roon ma shoulder. He asked if Ah wis awright. But Ah wis still greetin and tellin him a wis goinae get ma dad.

McEwan took me up tae ma door and told ma mam that boys, Roy, Stewart and Phillip Bailey had put dog jobbie on me and that Ah wis greetin but ma Mam sayd that she knew and that oor John hid jist been uptae the door.

'Whit did Ah tell you aboot goin near that church an that puddle? Get in that toilet and wash that stuff aff.' She sayd tae me. She telt McEwan that it was aboot time he was in fur his tea.

Ma Mam sayd tae ma Dad later that they Baileys are 'bad bastards' in that, 'what kind o behaviour dae ye expect from weans dragged up the way they ir. It's sinful whit them bloody weans hiv tae endure.' she sayd. 'Bloody animals them Baileys.' Ma Dad sayd.

But it wisnae their mam and dad it wis Roy, Stewart and Phillip Bailey who put jobbie on ma face that day Ah told the teacher. And Ah told her that that wis hundreds of sins and they wir the best sins Ah'd ever seen.

The teacher jist sayd that ma Mam wis right and that, 'These Bailey boys you talk about are indeed more to be pitied'. She says the whole class should pray for them and jist to make up a sin anyway if the priest asks me. She sayd Ah wisn't 'to bother the priest wi dirty sins about dog dirt'.

She did say but that Ah should definitely confess tae the priest that Ah hid jist sayd the 'B' and the Shh.. word.

Ah still hate the Baileys anyway.

200 miles homeward from the specialist

by Kate Tough

Three weeks shy of thirty-four
in my father's very comfortable car
I stop listening
attention drifting
to the opposite carriage

lorries on a motorway
too weighted to accelerate
push ahead
travel together
unintended cluster
nothing in common, other than
loaded and lumbering and lorries
a family, without meaning to be

he stops talking
his success reverberates
in the soft, sealed atmosphere
great redundant waves
a dirge to further loosen my moorings

menace looms
a violent sheet
from purple cloud to ground
it'll get us
it's just a matter of when

I had no-one else who could take me.

Three Poems by Joe McInnes

Full Bloom

I love the way wind moves unseen
stuff out into the open to hang
from dead trees like dirty washing.
Plastic bags rustle and flap as wet
vests. Bunched on a branch crisp
wrapper leaves are stiff socks.
Toilet paper drapes the bough
like origami flowers arranged
in pink, blue and green. Grass
where polystyrene take-away
cartons gather like dropped
fruit in decay. Garbage in full bloom
harvests its own season. Let the wind
scatter its seed.

storm troopers

umbrellas rain from the afternoon sky
like parachutes. take up strategic positions

behind low lying walls, beneath car wheels,
cluster in bushes. others snag in trees,

limp frames flapping. a united nations
of brollyhood, multicoloured,

camouflaged in pink polka dot,
led by a black and white tao triangle

engaged in hand-to-hand combat.
broken on the roadside.

Spaced Out

The crescent moon nail quick on sky finger
pointing down upon the earth dust writing
prescriptions for getting stoned on tablets.
Digging-up the dirt on the queue jumpers
swallowing a large dose of half-moon truth.
'The crazy moon man looks like a crazy
finger man, a nail man, far out stone man.'
Placed on the tongue tip it hits the mark.
No worlds to translate earth words into stone
language, only wagging fingers pointing
at the moon. The truth is written in quick sand
by the dropping crescent moon sky finger.
Kneeling on the dirt out of your tiny mind,
spaced out staring at an ink blue sky.

Port Glasgow Gala Bingo

by Sean McLaughlan

Port Glasgow Gala Bingo
Monday

Mary looked oot over the Port Glasgow Gala Bingo cash desk; she wis annoyed.
See Mary was best known during the Nineties for running away with a married Provident man - there wis a big
furore about it at the time.
At the time Mary was painted as the scarlet woman; see he hid three weans " Eventually Mary hid seen
sense and sent him packin back tae his wife.
Lookin back Mary realised that she'd went a wee bit mad efter her maw left.
Over the years Mary knew she'd let herself go - she'd piled on the pounds.
She knew people talked about her and her big 'fat erse.' She'd heard the Cleaners yappin,
Watch yer man wi big Mary. They'd say.
They never let the Provi man incident drap.
It occurred to Mary, as she looked oot over the counter - It didnae take much tae be notorious in the Port.

Port Glasgow Gala Bingo
Tuesday

Mary looked oot over the Port Glasgow Gala Bingo cash desk and sighed.
Tricia weighed six stone, smoked like a trooper and hid absolutely nae chest tae talk about, yet it was her that
told Mary about the prayer fir dieters.
Religiously Mary had followed the instructions: Three Hail Mary's, two Our Fathers, and ye'd tae sip a wee bit
of holy water every day for three weeks.
Tricia guaranteed her she'd lose the weight.
Mary had kept up the prayin and sippin for over a month; a couple of weeks extra couldnae dae any herm -
the merr weight lost the better.
Mary couldn't put into words how disappointed she felt when she heard that Tricia had got her prayers mixed
up. Instead of the prayer being for dieters it was actually for world peace.
World peace! Mary thought.
God whit a bloody waste of time.

Port Glasgow Gala Bingo
Wednesday

Mary looked oot over the Port Glasgow Gala Bingo cash desk and thought about her mother.
Mary's mother wis in showbiz - still wis somewhere.
She'd left Mary and her fether when Mary was eight.
Never satisfied.
Mary's fether always said.
Put herself before her wean. Never forgive her.
Mary had always dreamed about bein in the flashy showbiz side of life tae " like her mam.
Didn't she watch the Xfactor religiously and hadn't she went out with the ugly guy from Curry's Electrical just
because he had his own Karaoke equipment and done nights in pubs.
Mary's mother worked on the cruise ships.
Mary looked oot the Gala Bingo glass doors " Imagine if I was on a cruise ship daen the karaoke and it was
the same ship ma mother was workin on.
How good would at be? She thought to herself.

Port Glasgow Gala Bingo
Thursday

Mary looked out over the Port Glasgow Gala Bingo cash desk. She still felt steamin frae last night. Last night hid been wan of the best of her life. Cha (the guy from Curry's) hid done his Karaoke in Mick Lees. It went doon a pure storm. Mary remembered how actually for most of the night she'd organised the songs and the singers. Cha hid unloaded the gear from a taxi, he didnae hiv a car and basically she'd done all the rest.

'Ah hope yer gettin paid for it' her fether said when she got hame. But she didnae care money. She'd felt like Kate Thornton on Xfactor introducin all the acts.

Efter the Karaoke hid finished her and Tricia hid got full on Vodka and the last thing she remember wis singin along tae Bros and 'When will Ah be famous'

'You were brilliant at it' Tricia says 'yer maw should hiv seen ye'

What a tear. Mary's head wis boppin noo but.

Turbines

by Sue Wilson

Standing on the dam, Sonia and Alastair watched the mighty curtain of water plunging from beneath their feet, a ceaseless broad parabola of white-frothed peaty brown, meeting the loch in a roaring maelstrom forty feet below.

"The baddie would have to end up going down there," Alastair said. They were imagining the hydro station as the climactic setting for an independent Scottish thriller movie.

"Aye," said Sonia, "almost at the very end " but then he wouldn't actually be dead. He'd have to reappear somehow for one last go, before the hero finally killed him."

"Okay. He could fall in from this side, rather than actually going through the dam."

"As long as we have the bit where the hero escapes up the salmon ladder."

"Oh, yeah, absolutely. That's a deal-breaker."

They'd arrived the previous night for a long weekend, and the dam was much the best thing about the place so far. The hotel that had looked fine on its website was more akin to an old folks' home, right down to the smell of pee pervading the 1970s extension where their room was, and the truly terrible food. They were booked in for dinner, bed and breakfast, three nights for the price of two having seemed like a good deal. Only two of the pubs along the high street were open at that time of year, both charmlessly refurbished and unfriendly. The shops were full of conservative knitwear and hillwalking gear.

But while they were lunching on lasagne and chips in a striplit wood-effect café noisily crowded with families, it stopped raining. It was still dry when they came out, and maybe the clouds were starting to lift and lighten, at least for the time being. Following the signs along the river to the dam, they were entranced by its elemental drama, despite all the utilitarian 1940s concrete. Handsome is as handsome does, after all, and there was something majestic in the sheer implacability of this giant inverted wedge, buttressing a whole deep wide importunate river.

The sky continued to hint at brightness in the offing, and Alastair took her hand as they walked back along the gantry, for another look through the viewing window down into the turbine room.

"That'd be a great spot for a shootout," Sonia said. "All those funnels and pipes and booths to hide behind."

"Yeah. Excellent ricochets, too, with all that metal."

Sonia never knew how far these jokes would take them nowadays. It was something they'd always done, these quick impromptu constructions of traded whimsy and banter, running gags of variable duration, running stitches sewing their awareness together. But it hadn't been happening much lately, and even when it did there'd been times when she'd blithely proffered the next bit of embroidery on the theme, and he'd just suddenly frozen her with the thinnest of reluctant smiles.

They both liked the salmon ladder, though. So much grace was salvaged when the dam's designers, despite all the seemingly larger exigencies of postwar Scotland, engineered this neat shallow staircase, like a miniature strip of terraced hillside against the water's steep downward arc. Inside, a series of gentler currents and resting pools, in service of a force just as implacable, in its way.

But now the clouds were darkening again, the first cold smirr of rain striking as they hurried towards town. They had tea and dry, chewy scones in the other café along the high street, then ran back through what was

now a settled downpour to their room at the hotel, where Alastair sat in the armchair reading the paper, and Sonia lay on the bed reading her book. After another truly terrible dinner, they watched *Basic Instinct* in the residents' lounge, working their way through most of the bottle of Macallan they'd bought that morning, and all the stem ginger shortbread.

Before crashing out, they did at least come up with a plan for next day. Sonia had picked up a tourist leaflet with a map of easy local walks, among which promises was an hour or so's scenic wending beyond the town, around to a conservation village containing an ancient and celebrated pub.

In its serene late-autumn state, most of the countryside they saw turned out to be pretty nondescript. The confident purple ovoid line on the map bore scant relation to the scattering of signs along their route, and they kept having to double back through the wrong nondescript bit. Eventually they fetched up beside a field of young cows, beyond which lay the picturesque outlines of their destination. A stile over the fence, flanked by a footpath marker, invited them across.

"I think we should go that way," Alastair said, pointing along the road, which looped widely around the field before entering the village.

"Don't be daft, it's about three times the distance. There wouldn't be a sign if we weren't allowed."

"It's too muddy."

"It's not that bad. Come on, I'm freezing."

"I just don't want to walk through those cows, okay? Some of them might be bullocks. I'm going along the road." He turned away and started walking, leaving her to follow if she chose.

She stared after him for a minute, then chose not to, climbing over and into the field instead, watching her step for cowpats. Some of the animals looked up from grazing as she passed, regarding her placidly before returning their attention to the tussocky, churned-up grass.

She wondered how he'd be when he got to the pub. It might be as if nothing had happened, as if their separate arrivals marked the merest divergence of inclinations, no bad temper involved. Or it might be the start of the full cold-shoulder treatment, or perhaps some middle distance in between. It would all depend on how he chose to play the fact he'd showed her a weakness.

Near the centre of the field, the path passed a tumbledown huddle of red-brown stone that she'd taken for derelict farm buildings, but closer up they seemed too big and old and round for that. Consulting her leaflet, she learned they were the remnants of a mediaeval castle with a Gaelic name, built on a man-made island in the loch that once covered the field. The last people who'd lived there had perished in the great plague some five hundred years before, after which a cannon was fired on the building to form their funeral pyre.

Mounting the stile where the path led on into the village, Sonia scanned the curve of the road until she spotted Alastair, his red jacket and the hunchback outline of his rucksack, still a good way off. She waved, but maybe he wasn't looking her way, or maybe he pretended he wasn't; it was too far to see.

The pub was just over the main street, a sturdy whitewashed black-timbered inn that had been welcoming weary travellers since half a century before Culloden. Sonia scented the woodsmoke eddying from its chimney. The adjoining kerb was lined with cars, mountain-bikes propped three abreast against the end wall. The two guys smoking outside were glancing her way. She checked reflexively behind her then set off down the road back towards town, fishing her phone from her pocket to switch it off. She'd be well out of sight round the corner by the time he got there.

The dam seemed even more loudly in spate as she climbed the steps to the gantry, and she saw that another sluice was open, doubling the throughput from yesterday. She leant over the chest-high barrier and let the massive ceaseless rush of water lull her. She wondered if he'd realise where to find her, but knew he probably wouldn't come even if he did.

It wasn't the season to see salmon, but there was their monument, a wee helping hand in their mammoth uphill struggle to mate, spawn and die.