

I'm Not the Man you Know

by Stuart Finegan

The Thursday crowd in McGinley's Pub knew exactly when Hubert Pennybottom was going to arrive, usually around half past eight, wearing a shiny brown coat that had once been expensive and carrying himself with the confidence of a shady member of the Dail. It wasn't unusual if he briskly walked in, ordered a double Paddy Power before anyone had a chance to ask him a question. He didn't like questions. Stories, on the other hand, were Hubert's speciality.

"I've barely had a moment to myself this week, lads," he announced as he perched himself on a bar stool. "Dublin on Monday. Cork Tuesday. Galway Wednesday. Back in Dublin this afternoon entertaining clients in one of the finest restaurants in the city."

A few heads nodded as they stared down hard into their pints.

"What line of work are you in again, Hubert?" asked Carlow Tommy, the plumber, even though he knew the answer.

Hubert smiled.

"Strategic consultancy."

No one had a fucken clue what that meant.

"Powerful people rely on me, Thomas: the bankers, politicians, investors. Decisions affecting thousands pass across my desk every week."

Hubert took a long drink, then lowered his voice to make himself appear important,

"This afternoon, for example, I had lunch with a man who could buy and sell half of Ireland if he wanted."

The regulars exchanged impressed glances, but only one person seemed unconvinced. Old Jerry sat alone in the snug, nursing a pint of Guinness.

At seventy-eight, his hearing was poor in one ear but remarkably sharp in the other. He rarely spoke, but he listened, and he had been listening to this eejit Hubert for years—his every foolish story and adventure. At first Jerry had found it amusing, then irritating and eventually he felt sorry for Hubert. Jerry knew the truth, and it was nothing like Hubert's stories. The man calling himself Hubert Pennybottom had once been Peter Rourke from Blackrock.

Fifteen years earlier, Peter had convinced his wife, brothers and half his friends to invest everything they had in a ridiculous business venture involving imported electronic dog collars that supposedly translated barks into English. An idea that sounded revolutionary after enough bottles of Blue Nun. Within eighteen months, the company had folded. The money was gone, friendships were destroyed, and his marriage was over. His children stopped answering his calls. The last of the investors had tried taking him to court, but Peter eventually drifted away, changed his name and somehow became Hubert Pennybottom. There was only one problem. He couldn't stop lying. Back at McGinley's, Hubert was reaching the grand finale of his latest adventure.

"So, lads, there I was, seated beside the owner of a multinational corporation. Wonderful fellow. Flew me over in a helicopter."

"A helicopter?"

"Yes, Michael."

"What did he want, your helicopter man?"

"My advice."

The regulars were impressed; most of them had never been on Ryanair, let alone a helicopter.

"You know, lads, people think success is money; I believe I am happy because I am not ambitious."

Even Jerry looked up; the happiest liar in Ireland looked desperately lonely outside the rain tapped against the windows. Hubert drained another whiskey. Jerry had had enough. With a sigh, he rose from the snug. No one noticed until he stepped into the main bar and carried an empty Guinness glass in one hand. Without speaking, he placed it gently on the counter.

"Another Guinness, please, Mary."

After a few minutes, Jerry took a sip, then he turned to face the room. Everyone knew Jerry rarely spoke, but when he did, it was usually worth listening.

"Our friend Hubert Pennybottom isn't Hubert Pennybottom."

The room fell silent.

Hubert froze. Jerry continued.

"His real name is Peter Rourke. He's from Blackrock."

Nobody moved.

"A fraudster, he lost his family's money on a foolish business plan. His wife left him. His children won't speak to him. Most of his friends walked away years ago."

Everyone turned towards Hubert. A deep red colour covered his face.

Jerry slowly sipped his pint.

"The powerful businessman you all admire spends most afternoons alone in the library because it's warm and nobody asks questions."

"You old fool," Hubert nervously replied.

Jerry ignored him.

"There were no helicopters, not even a Ryanair flight to Knock, no executives, no important meetings."

A few people looked embarrassed; Tommy stared down at his drink. Hubert rose from his stool.

"That's enough," shouted Hubert, "I think I've had enough."

The pub became unbearably uncomfortable. For the first time anyone could remember, Hubert looked nervous. Then something unexpected happened. A voice spoke from near the doorway.

"Actually..."

Everyone turned around to see who had spoken. A tall woman stood just inside the door, rain dripping from her coat. She appeared to be in her forties. Her eyes never left Hubert. The colour drained from his face. Suddenly the glass slipped from his hand and shattered on the floor. Nobody recognised the woman, except Hubert.

"Great to see you. How did you find me?"

"I've been looking for you for a very long time, Peter."

A silence settled over the bar. Even Jerry's looked surprised. The woman stepped forward and reached into her handbag. Hubert took a step backwards.

"What do you want?"

She removed a thick brown envelope and placed it carefully on the bar. Written in black marker was a single word. Evidence. The woman placed one hand on the envelope, then she looked directly at Jerry.

"You think you know who this man is?"

Jerry remained silent.

"Let me tell you, you don't."

The woman gave a cold smile; the regulars looked uncomfortable. Outside, thunder rolled across the city. Inside the bar, everyone remained fixed on the envelope. When the woman finally opened it, Hubert let out a cry that suggested the truth was far worse than anything old Jerry had imagined.