

The Mullaghreelan Bicycle

A timed exercise

by Patrick Hyland

I'm not one for stereotypes, generally. But some professions you think of and you can just picture the cut. Banking, with the slicked-back hair, navy suit. Silver Fossil watch they keep glancing down at. Fast talkers. Teaching, and the tweed jacket, folder under the arm. Cup of coffee steaming in the hand. Blue biro tucked behind the ear with the arse chewed off it.

Electricians with the black Caterpillar cargos, the legs of the pliers sticking out of the pocket, black T-shirt a size too small, and a half-sleeve tattoo on the right arm depicting a Norse god sword-fighting some sea creature. A poorly translated bit of wisdom on the inner bicep.

Then there's the over-the-hill bakers. The off-white apron tied a little too tight around the midriff, belly under pressure; thick beige paste under the fingernails. Crusty nuggets of congealed wheat flour stuck in the nostrils that'd make John Belushi squirm. Cigarette hanging off the bottom lip, a half-inch of ash clinging on for dear life, bits falling into the sourdough starter.

But have you ever come across a tree surgeon? Salt of the earth. Rugged, hardened. Skin torn up from the brush and the thorns; a back wide as a canyon from years of wrestling oak. The type you'd trust to look after your dog. But fuck me, they can spin a yarn.

I came across one last Friday in Kiely's. By the Guinness tap on his own, so I perched up in his shade. The paws on him — you couldn't make out the pint glass. Told me about the time he met the Queen. She was riding horseback, and he was halfway up a Himalayan fir.

"Fuck off," I said. But the stories kept coming.

And he said, "Come here to me."

So I lifted two fingers toward the lad behind the taps and leaned in.

“Wait till I tell you about the time I was working in Kildare as an apprentice. Woke up two hours late with a head on me like a bag of wasps, John Jameson on the throat. Tongue on me like sandpaper. Cycled ninety miles an hour down the back roads of Athy to Mullaghreelan Woods. The whiskey got a second wind going round a bend, and I went straight through a ninety-year-old cedar. Boss told me to piss off back to Carlow. Never did get the bike back.”