

Confessions of an I.R.A. Terrorist

by David Ackley

I been an Irish cabbie in London for going on twenty five years. I mean an Irishman all my life, a cabbie in London for...but I already said that. You'll excuse me, writing's not really the game. When you're Irish the two, talking and writing, are supposed to come easy, taken with the mammy's milk or some such. But it's only so for some of us, like anywheres else. Most of us are just ordinary mutts with no gift for writing, nothing like Joyce James and Brendan what's-is that did them plays...any of those.

But I was meaning to tell you about the career in the I.R.A. and that.

This was in nineteen and ninety eight when I'd been driving hack in the city for about ten years, little flat in Battersea, the wife and kid, just an ordinary bloke trying to make a living. It's the fall I'm talking about, when, for what reasons I forget, the I.R.A. had ginned-up the old bombing campaign, and for a few weeks it seemed there was a bomb going off somewheres in London--pub, postal box, or station--about every hour or so.

A jumpy place, London in those days, bit like the blitz for the old ones I suspect. The cops in their yellow slickers on their black BMWs like giant bees buzzing through the traffic with flashing blue lights. The whoop-whoop-whoop of the klaxons, and all the evacs, and the bomb-sniffing dogs you saw anywheres about.

I was in Waterloo station waiting on a fare, and a voice comes on the blower:

"Will the person who left the suitcase near the kiosk by the south

entrance please retrieve it at once or it will be taken away and destroyed. Please pardon the inconvenience. Thank you very much." That's the Brit all over; polite to the last, please and pardon and thank you very much, even as they're about to detonate your undies.

Early on it was mostly the old property that got blown up, the I.R.A. calling Scotland Yard in time for the cops to clear the people out before the bomb went off. But they planted one in a pub in Picadilly and the call come too late and one bloke died in hospital of his injuries from the blast. You hoped the poor bugger at least got to finish his pint before the place went up.

Londoners being a cool lot, I didn't get reminded too often that I was someone as might be considered on the other side, in a way of speaking. Oh, sometimes a passenger would catch the name on the plaque, and throw me a glance in the mirror, or they'd hear the brogue and then look at the name. A few would recall a stop sooner than the one first said, get out, pay, and move off quite smart. But I couldn't ever say for sure if it was the name, not having thought about it that way before. I didn't take it personally, I guess you'd say.

Not at least until the day a woman hailed me in Hampstead and gave me an address on the south side of the river, a good fifteen pounds, which I quickly pocketed in mind and was having a pint or two on in the bargain before I went home to the old lady. It was the day they found the valise in Waterloo with enough gelignite to blow a locomotive through the south wall, so the papers said. I cased her a couple times in the mirror just out of habit--you've no idea how a cabbie looks you over, once he's had the shiv beside his ear that first time.

She was in her forties, attractive in the gaunt way of your bourgie type, blonde hair, the cashmere scarf pulled tight in some complicated knot, the old Barbour waterproof. She'd somewhat on her mind, maybe, looking past me as if to hurry the traffic along, but

we were in the thick of it on the boulevard, making about two meters a minute. We'd only crawled a slow half-k when her look hit on the plaque and she saw the name, her eyes right wide as if they seen the flash of something going off.

"Driver, " she croaks when she gets some of her breath, "I've changed my mind. I need to get out here. Driver? You need to please let me out. Open this door, please."

Fuck, there went the fifteen pounds in favor of two and six, the old pints dwindling to--at best--a half of bitter.

"I can't let you off here, Miss, we're in the thick of it, " I says. "If you was to get off in the out lane, I'd lose me badge. Just stay calm, Miss. Leave me pull over when I get room and I'll have you out."

But she wasn't having any of it, preferring to throw herself under the Harrod's lorry that had me hemmed-in as stay in an Irishman's cab one minute longer.

"I demand to be let out. You have no right to lock me in. Open the door at once." Her face had got twisted and a bit mean, the anger coming in over the fear. " If you don't let me out at once, you stupid git, I'll report you to the authorities." She reached in her purse and pulled out a silver pen and waved it at my eyes in the mirror. " See, I'm taking down your name and cab number. I will write a letter." And she would too, the Brits are great on the letter writing and don't think it can't fuck you up.

"Miss, " I says, pointing at the lorry, "I'm right boxed-in here, just give me a half." But she wasn't giving shite and proceeded to go off like a bloody fucking rocket.

"No, No, No! Now! I need to get out Now! Open this fucking door, you goddamned terrorist bomb-throwing bastard. You Irish shit, Let

me out now..." She was kicking the back of my seat, the bloody...

So that was the lay of it: already had me for I.R.A. and we hadn't been fifteen minutes together. And probably wouldn't pay the two--now onto three--and six; once I had the door open she'd be running for her life. I felt the surge of me Irish, thinking of all the other inequities the Brits had visited on our poor downtrod people, time out of mind, of me family that was gunmen during the Rebellion- the great-uncles Bob, and Michael, whose own name I bear.

First they exploit you, then you rise up against it and scare the shite out of them and from the fear comes the advanced oppression, the boot everlasting on your neck. Not this boyo.

At the first chance I gunned it into the right lane and, risking life and worse, fenders, swung into the next alley we came to, pulling a ways in and shutting down the engine.

When she saw where we was, she put her hand to her mouth and went dead pale. "That'll be three and six," says I.

"Please, please don't hurt me. Just open the door, can't you? I promise I won't say a word. I won't tell a soul, I swear to you..."

Tell anyone what? I thinks. That I tried to collect a pocky three and six and you're after calling me a bomb thrower and terrorist? In a pig's ass you won't tell anyone, even if there's naught to tell, and who are they going to believe, Miss Rich Tart from Hampstead, or the one step up from vagrancy Irish cabbie? She knew--even if she was as terrified as she made out--that once she got out she could hoist me up for good. The bolt that holds the English class system is that if you're a step below they're allowed to bugger you blind and penniless anyway as suits them. So that's when I crossed over.

"Well, Miss," I says. "You got me. The question is, what are we going

to do with it?"

Until then I don't think she'd believed all the way what she was saying; she'd just wanted to get out and away because I was Irish and all, but now in the added fear that rose up in her eyes was the thought that it just might be true. How did she know I wasn't I.R.A., a gunman, bomber, terrorist? Maybe she could even see in the mirror that in some deep part of my soul I was all that indeed.

"Buh, buh, buh, " she says with her hand clapped over her mouth.

"Let's have it," I says, reaching me hand back over the seat. She put her purse in it, which I opened up, pawing through until I came up with the money and her drivers license. I read the name and address out loud,

"Celia Lawrence, 75 Old Belfry Road, Hampstead." I pulled the pencil off my ear and made a show of writing it down.

Then I counted through the bills and change and held up so she could see the three pounds six for the fare.

"No gratuity, Miss," I says. "Come the revolution we'll be banning any such insults to the masses." I thought I'd read that somewhere. "As far as your personal self, Miss," I says. "We've no war with the common folk." I could see her flinch at the word "common" , the word Brits of every class, especially the common ones, hate more than any other.

"It's the government, the cops and bosses we're after, and as long as you don't cause us no problems, we've no quarrel with you. If you've the luck you might never hear from us again." I reached her purse back, which she took with her right hand, the left being now imbedded between her teeth, me fearing she'd chew a hole in it before I was rid of her.

"One last thing, an I let you out," I says. I held up the slip of paper I'd writ on. "Care for a flier on how many of my countrymen drive cab in London?" She shook her head. I took a wild guess and multiplied it by three. "Fifteen hundred and forty seven, " I says. "Now, if there's any complaint or official interest placed on me own person, what with you knowing me name and all, how many do you think might be put in possession of what's writ here?"

I waved the paper just to focus her attention. A little tear squeezed from her right eye trickled down her cheek. I felt sorry for her, really I did and all; but she had everything on her side, government, class, money, her whole country really, fucking army and all, and who was I but a lone foreigner who couldn't even run with my own, not wishing to get caught up in the business by accident, if you see what I mean.

"Fifteen hundred and forty six, I reckon, since I wouldn't count myself twice, " I says.

I turned back to the wheel, flipped the automatic lock and heard the door open and slam shut. I put the paper in my shirt pocket, not wanting to forget what I wrote-- 1/2kg. cheddar. / orange marm--and started the engine. Not even bothering to watch her go, I drove back out on the boulevard to look for another fare.

That's the whole I.R.A. career, more or less. The bombing fell off shortly after and in time they signed the peace treaty and Northern Ireland was calm until the day when it aint again and here I am, twelve years later, still driving cab in London.

But it's strange how the old things are always coming back in new duds. Now it's the fellows with the brown, black and tan skins that are under suspicion from all the shite going down in the countries they came here to get away from. A good lot of them are cabbies,

some of them mates of mine, like this Sikh I run into at Heathrow in the queue for incoming flights. Fine looking git with a trimmed black beard and a grey turban, who we call "Sink" splitting the difference between his last name, Singh, and his aforesaid religion. There's the Pakky cab starter, Mohammed, and several decent blokes of the Hindu and Muslim persuasions.

Sometimes I'll be fourth or fifth in the queue, and the passengers will start pouring out the gate. The starter will grab the suitcase handle of one to load the front cab, but when the passenger looks inside and sees the color of the driver he rips his suitcase back and staggers down the line passing by the brown, black and tan terrorists until at last he sees a white face and throws himself into my cab with a sigh of relief. When we drive off I raise my middle finger over the roof in salute to my chums and from three cab windows in a line come a brown, black and tan middle finger sending it back to me.

One day on a break between planes, we're outside the gate having a smoke together, me and Sink and Mohammed and a few of the other drivers and I tell them the story of my short career with the I.R.A. At the end, I say to them, " Boys, I had to get out of the terrorism. It's no game for an old man...You young fellows, now...An' if you do get into it, here's my bit of advice from my time in the game: If you're stuck with some rich, white prick that won't get off you...Ask him if he knows how many Pakky cabbies there are in London town."

They all laugh and poke each other, and Sink calls me " a right funny fooker," taking off the accent spot on.

And that's my story, Michael Patrick O'Donovan, London Hack. I.R.A. Gunman and Terrorist(ret.) Call me Paddy. Everybody does.

