

# Ian Brotherhood

# Tales of The Great Unwashed

Starts out with a wee trail of what looks like torn paper and glass shards at the bay-window. It's only seven in the morning but I'm up, as usual, to get Mary roused and ready for school. Thing is, Mary's away three months past, moved in with that lad Peety. He's a trainee draughtsman, his parents are both lecturers in the college. He seems like a nice lad right enough. Bastard.

So at first you would think this is like the trail of a snail or a slug, a sort of shiny thick line, with a wee roundish patch where the thing has turned about to go home. But the living-room is one-up, and the pointing got done year before last, so how them fellas is getting in here I don't know. I bend down and see it's not really a snail-trail, but a scatter of broken glass, tiny pieces flattened into the carpet. The carpet is damp right enough, and if I'm not mistaken there's a smell too, a smell like fusty drink.

I don't drink upstairs. Never have. She didn't like it, so I never did. No-one else uses this room. Mary barely used it what with having her own telly and that, so I can't figure it at all, and it bothers me the whole day.

That night is Christmas Eve, and The Great Unwashed will be closed tomorrow, so it's a late one with just a few of the lads. It wasn't the busiest of nights, but turned over a good few bob right enough, so no harm treating Doghead, Halfpint and Elbow to a few on the house.

Elbow is maudlin and girny, whining about missed chances and lost loves. Halfpint tries to throw in the occasional note of optimism, listing off his existing and imminent grandchildren and great-grandchildren with impressive detail. Only Doghead remains silent, content to savour the free drink in certain knowledge that it will not come from my direction for at least another year.

So what about you anyway Jack? says Halfpint, having exhausted all known statistics relating to his family and desperate not to allow Elbow another shot on the time remaining.

I shrug, swallow the pale remnants of the glass, then turn to pour another. My head is filled with soft pain, the shifting of happy memories against the dismal void I now call future.

Another glass for Halfpint and Bobby Elbow, but only a half lager for Joe, then I look up, meet Halfpint's red-rimmed peepers, and it all comes out. I'm bone weary, sick and have nothing left now that my girl has gone. First her mother, now her. I haven't a thing left apart from this fucked-up pub, and that's nothing to be in love with, nothing to get up for, nothing to take pictures of. There's nothing left for me now, nothing at all, and even if my numbers come up, what would I do now but give most to Mary, split a stack with the lads, and even then, what's to do with whatever's left? No. It's all over.

If I would have had the imagination when young, maybe, if I would have had the gall, maybe. But no. It's been alright. Nothing more than that. It's been alright, and now it's time to start making my way for the exit.

They stay silent. Halfpint nods. Elbow's chin is vibrating, eyes moist. Doghead stares at his glass, oblivious to it all. I've made them even more depressed. I turn, pour another for myself only, then tell them of the stain on the carpet up in the living room, how I can't figure it. It's meant to be a joke, a lightener, but Elbow sparks up, soberish and keen, and asks for more detail. His questions

confuse and irk, so I grab a bottle of Black Bush from the gantry and beckon them follow me upstairs.

I'm telling you Jack, says Elbow as he gets back up from the carpet at the window, it's the wee folk.

The bottle is empty. Doghead has collapsed into the sofa, but his pint remains lodged between his knees, the whisky tumbler settled neatly at the bottom of the larger glass. Halfpint stares out the window, focusing on the distant spot through the buildings opposite to where he imagines home to be. But Elbow seems active and serious now, pointing at the drying slime at the bay window.

That's them been having a party, he says, it's them right enough.

Little people? No way. Never heard any of that kind of talk for years, and even then, from the old dears, it was ever a joke. Leprechauns? Bogles? Hobblyboids? I maybe drew the old Rottenrows under the quilt of an evening if thoughts of those creatures flitted over me, but never lost an hour of sleep on their account, not the once. If you're prone to fright at such a thing you'd be as well surrendering yourself to the Banshees as well, and for all the talk I've heard of them there's never been one tailing my folk about anyway.

Nothing surer, says Elbow, upright, with forefinger pointed at the heavens, it's the unmistakable detritus of souls in limbo.

So I do feel a sort of a shiver then, what with talk of limbo and suchlike, and the shiver sort of stays on longer than a normal shiver would when Halfpint emits a high-pitched wheeze. I turn to see him scuttling behind Doghead's chair.

Elbow's eyes focus on a point somewhere at the base of the window.

Quiet now, says Elbow, slowly lowering himself to the ground, and tying his legs in a way which he bids me ape. Unable to accomplish the posture required, I sit on the deck, grip my knees close to my face, then watch. Elbow has closed his eyes, and is nodding gently at the floor-level juncture of the main and left-hand windows. Halfpint's whimpering is the only sound apart from the distant throb of city-centre traffic.

I close my own eyes, for what seems an instant, but when I open them again I see a black man, about a foot or so in height, peeking from behind the curtain which is gathered at the left-hand end of the bay. He is young, maybe thirty or so, and his expression is delirious, teeth white and parted in silent laughter. I shut my eyes and shake my brain, but when I look again the wee man has emerged from the drapes and is standing, arms wide, directly in front of Bobby Elbow. Although so small, he is well proportioned, if very thin-limbed, with thick dark hair curled tight against his scalp. Even in the confusing light cast by the indoor lamp and the amber outside, I can see his gown is brightest sea-green-blue, and about the broad neckline of the garment gleaming copper bells have been woven into the material. In his right fist is a thin short stick. I strain to keep my eyes open as he moves, and it is a slow, deliberate shift which brings his arms together, his stare all the time focused on the inert Elbow directly before him.

Then he plays a tune on the stick, but I can barely hear it. It is so high, so fine, that it is drowned by the faraway traffic, but I know he is playing something wonderful by the mould of his features, the crease of his brow, the drawing of

breath beneath the gown, and snatches of purest whistle which come to me when his little elbows are joined and at their highest. Elbow remains inert, staring beyond the window.

When the tune has ended, the man taps the stick to his head three times, looks up at the comatose Elbow, then turns to me.

Jack Doohihan! he cries, is this your face?

I can't move my hands, fingers knotted together to hold my knees. But something about my expression must confirm my identity, 'cause he strides closer and waves the flutestick up at me.

If any man here does not care for my tune, let him try to wipe his arse on a pebbledash gable and see how he likes it!

The little man's face is crunched with mirth as he nears me. I feel my breath suspend, my heart bang. He points the stick at me again, then broadens his arms, throws his head back, and laughs.

I am Danda. Danda! My name. True word! My English is bad, but twenty years I am waiting. Twenty years!

Elbow looks to be asleep. Behind me, the combined noises coming from Halfpint and Doghead form a sound somewhere between a snore and a death rattle. It seems I am alone. The little man nears. I have to crane forward to see his face.

You have some trouble mister! My Mercedes is bigger than yours!

I start to speak, but words don't form. He steps back again, looks at Elbow, then raises the flutestick to his lips, preparing to play again. I'm sure I'm talking then, asking who he is and what he wants but he does not hear or does not want to, and then, as he slumps and lowers the stick to hang limp between his legs, his face becomes so sad that I almost want to pick him up and comfort him. But before I can even untwine my fingers he has gone back behind the curtain, and when I next open my eyes it is with darkest blue sky, almost seven in the morning, and I get up, as always, to ready Mary for school.

Halfpint won't take my call—Jeanie says he got back awful late and made some noises, then she found him pishing in the wardrobe and he's been in bed ever since. Then she hangs up on me. Doghead is likewise unavailable, not having reported home at all—Sippy Pat is just about to leave to search for him. And when I call Elbow it is his daughter who answers—yes, he's in, no, he can't come to the phone, but yes, he'll call me right back.

An hour passes. The Great Unwashed, when quiet and dark, creaks and moans, as if recovering from the demands made of it by regular custom. The floorboards and furniture stretch and breathe—with the heating off, they get some peace. But I don't dally in the bar. All is clean, all shutters shut, all taps turned off. I need a snifter to calm the shakes, but prefer to take it upstairs, in that room. A spell of sorts has been broken. Drink was taken there last night, and no-one to voice objection, so I'll drink there again. Now.

Mary called early to say Happy Christmas, and she'll be up to see me as soon as they get back from London. He's friends down there who'll put them up, and they'll be staying, even for the Bells. She knows I'm disgusted and knows I know she knows it, but we exchange adult niceties and I hold my tongue. Fair do's.

But sitting in this chilly room now is defiance. I defy the dark-skinned ghost to appear again. I

defy the disappearance of friends who were so happy to join my company only hours ago, when the drink was free of charge and no bells would ring them off the premises. I defy the losses I have suffered in this life. I'm still here, in my pub, drinking good whisky honestly earned, at a time of year when others of my age are running hither and yon at the command of upstart youngsters. This is a free shop. Mine is a free life. I owe no one. I will continue. I will...

When I snap awake, he is standing between my knees, his face mangled with anger.

You are Jack! he shouts, and I feel the sudden shock of liquid on my thigh as my tumbler slips, but I cannot move my eyes from his.

Mister Dooihhan, I will do this job, a very big job for you. I will go when I do it, and you will be thanking Danda when he is gone. If there is anyone who does not know what my job is, and why I do it, let him drink two pints of bad palm wine and see how he likes it!

The little man moves away to the bay window, towards the point where I first saw him, but now the drapes are down, slung across the angled junctures of central and side outlooks. He takes the flute-stick from somewhere inside his rough blue gown and taps the skirting board.

In here! he shouts then, turning briefly to raise the stick at me before once again tapping the upper ridge of the long low panel. The noise is hollow and surprisingly loud.

They are in here now! he cries again, and he's dropped the stick and his tiny fingers are gripped behind the board at spaces where paint has not filled the warped skirting. He hauls and heaves, soles prised against the board, but there isn't so much as a squeak.

I shift forward in the armchair. It is real enough. I am awake. Head spinning, sure, but awake. I slip off the chair to my knees and crawl towards the window. The little man picks up his flutestick and steps back as I near.

Danda starts to play as I fumble in my pocket for the knife. It's a corkscrew, a folding one with small blade for cutting wine-seals. It is only one long, hard swipe to cut the seal of old paint layers which bind the board to the plaster and thickened paper, and the little man jumps back as I haul the skirting from it's place to lie face down on the carpet. There is a billow of dust, cobweb threads flutter up towards me. Danda coughs.

They are in there! Be rid of them Jack, they are no good for you. They want to eat the world!

I lower my face to the floor. The stoor lines my nostrils, sends me back to childhood nights when I stayed up late watching the dark sea roar while sucking on old lace curtain. I hear Danda snort behind me as I peer into the recess.

There, in the dusty space, on antique floor-board, amidst scuttling slaters and the shifting of a scrawny white spider, three figures no bigger than my thumb face me. They are dressed in grey, perhaps once white, and tiny sparkles about their hands and neck betray the presence of cheap and tired jewellery. They are moving, but eyes are

closed, hands clasped over their ears. I know I've seen them before, but the shock of seeing them here must be evident in whatever noise it is that I emit. I sit up, draw the blade close on the tool, and feel my breath shallow.

Them is heeby-jeeby fellas to cause you trouble! Maybe your missus called them to here, but the missus is away now. They stay! Always they stay. They want to eat the world!

Of course, it is them. I put my head down to have another look, and they've not moved, although their hips still sway, their tiny expressions jerk, their mouths gape and close in perfect unison. It is the Bee Gees, no doubt about it.

I tolerated them during those years when Mary's Mum pined to be out jiggling and making merry, those same years I confined her to toil behind the bar downstairs. I hated them as much as she loved them, and our love and hate of them grew as did our fight for dominance. When we knew Mary was on the way, it calmed, but I still recall sweating, panicking during post-Old-Firm-rush, when she was heavy with our lass but could not help out, snatches of Stayin' Alive and More than a Woman reaching me from the upstairs bedroom, the falsetto harmonies screaming a protest of enjoyment lost, freedom stolen.

My body spasms with fright as the shattering volume of the phone fills the room. A movement to my side, Danda is heading for the right hand drape, his brilliant blue gown swirling and billowing, and by the time I look back into the dimness below the bay, more dust has been raised by the panicked Gibb brothers. I squint and strain to make out any trace, and fancy I see a lightly bearded face disappear at the point where floor-board meets masonry.

Elbow is apologetic and enthusiastic in equal measure. He double-checked with his Aunt, and yes, she agrees that it's likely the wee people. Yes, he'll check out Danda in the books, and yes, he knows now what to do about it all. He'll be with me before midnight. I get back in the armchair, stare at the spot where the trio had been performing, and knot my fingers to stop them reaching for the Bushmills. Bobby is good to his word, and I've a generous measure down my neck between his ringing the bell and me opening the door to him. He raises a stern and open palm when I lift the bottle afront his pale face, and asks me to take him to the kitchen. He scouts about in the cupboards and oven, then drags out the biggest pot, the heavy-based wing-handled affair we use for the soup. He passes me the lid, tells me not to ask, so I don't.

Now then, where's this Danda fellow? he asks, so we venture back upstairs. Elbow drags a hard-backed stool over beside my armchair, settles the giant pot in front of him, folds his jacket into a rough cushion, settles his arse, rolls a cigarette, and then accepts a dram. I replenish mine. All is quiet.

He wants out, says Elbow, the wee man wants out. He's a fictional character from a novel by a Nigerian lad called Nwankwo. It was published

way back, early sixties or such, so he might've been here for a while.

Twenty years, I say then, recalling the wee man's words. He said twenty years he's been waiting.

Well then, says Elbow, that's at least twenty years worth of wee folk you've got creeping about. Likelihood is the place got cleaned out regular before then, but since you've been here they've been building up. You could have all sorts in the stonework, in the cellar, the attic. There's nowhere they can't call home, so we'd best be about it and get the decks cleared.

Where did he come from? I ask then, and Elbow shakes his head, grim faced but loving it.

Someone put him in here, but it's you wants him out. That's why he's asking you. I can't see him, so he's asking you to help him get out.

Me? I pour another one and very much want to cry. I tell Elbow about the Bee Gees being behind the skirting, and he smiles and nods.

It's par for the course, he says, but it's not usual to find them in there. More often it's likes of behind a boiler or a radiator, anywhere there's a wee bit extra heat. They like the warmth. Sometimes they go under the sink if there's hot water on the go a lot, but they can make a right mess of the pipework with their teeth. Aye, you're best rid of them right enough.

And then it all happens. Danda appears, arms flailing, from behind Elbow's chair. I steady myself, Bobby notices my face, follows my stare, but registers nothing.

He's back, I say, and Elbow drags the heavy steel lid from the pot.

Danda runs for the door, and I follow, Bobby close behind with the pot swinging from one arm, the lid from the other. Danda halts on the landing, checks back to see how close we are, then starts banging with open palms on the door of the Glory Hole, a long thin room crammed with all manner of shite accumulated these past two decades.

Heeby Jeeby fellas in here now! shouts Danda, so I haul the door open, and in we go.

Suitcases crammed with old photo albums and diaries, boxes of Mary's schoolbooks and jotters, three sets of golf clubs Doghead turned up with one night, a primitive television set, the top half of a standard lamp that used to have pride of place in the Snug, all are thrown out onto the landing before Danda screams and points his flutestick—right there at the base of an old Calor gas heater, arms wide in panic, his feet flitting with fear, there is the middle of the brothers, forget his name, the one with the baldy patch, and I snatch him up and pass him to Elbow.

Bobby stares at me as if I have lost it, but then I remember he cannot see the wee man.

That's one, I assure him, and lower the creature into the giant pot. Elbow slides the lid back over as I strain to see where Danda has now gone.

Half an hour later, we have them. The oldest one, the one with the big hair, he made a decent fist of it and tried to bite as I lifted him, but the other one came quietly enough, no doubt pining

for his siblings. But Danda isn't done—he climbs on, over the stacked boxes, to a recess of the hole which has not been visited for many years. These are Mary's baby clothes and toys, carefully newspapered, preserved for her adulthood, for her own children. But they too are shifted roughly in the search. My back is glowing with pain, sweat running like tears as I haul the boxes aside, following the angle of Danda's flute. A crate of her Mum's records and tapes gets in the way as well, but once that's out the road you can see a small shape shivering, the wee head buried into its belly, and when I lift it up it moans low and mean, like a scared cat. It is no bigger than a newborn kitten as well, and I don't much like the feel of it, cold and grimy as it is, but when I put it into the pot and it slides down the cusp of the steel base to settle against the covered forms of the unprotesting Bee Gees, it uncurls itself and leaps up towards the rim of the pot with a despairing howl, eyes wide, teeth bared. Even in the dim light, the moustachioed face is instantly familiar, and I realise that I have just captured a middle-aged Omar Sharif.

Danda climbs and searches further, delving into spaces and patches of darkness whose contents I cannot even begin to recall. The weight of objects denies me access, so I'm relieved when, after much tapping and scraping and growling, Danda emerges, every bit as frantic as before, from the Glory Hole and starts leaping down the stairs one at a time, his gown filling with each jump.

Now they are running! Danda shouts as we follow him down to the bar.

By the scuffling and scraping you can tell that we've cornered a good stack of them in the recess where the puggy and juke-box stand. Bobby lays down the pot and stands a three-legged stool atop to keep the lid firm as we shift the furniture, then we set about the panelling. It comes away with a surprising ease I make a mental note of—that was Doghead's work. But when the final pins pop and the plywood sheet gives, there's twenty or more of them huddled against the plasterwork—most of them I don't recognise, but there's a young Michael Parkinson, Tina Turner before she got the big wigs on her, Charlton Heston in his Dynasty outfit, Johnny and the Self Abusers, frilly Prince when he was purple-daft, the starving wean with the tin your man McCullin took a picture of, and they're all like backing up against each other, faces front as I pluck them off and plop them in the pot. Some do get away. Danda does his best to shepherd them my direction with his flutestick, but Bobby Elbow is no use in this regard.

By the time we have moved, under Danda's instructions, to the Snug, Elbow is white and tiring.

I don't know if I can take much more, he says, and I look at Danda, who nods his agreement.

The ones will stay who want the most to stay, Danda says, and then he starts tapping half-heartedly on the base of the corner-piece sofa which was here before I even clapped eyes on the place.

There's a sound of things unsticking themselves when we pull the unit from the wall. Danda has gone up onto the thing, and is flaked out, exhausted. Bobby backs off, sits on the pot-lid, then cradles his head in his palms.

I peek behind the detached unit. A grimy fork, a red-striped straw, bright orange isosceles of carpet mimicking the brown everyday version. Nothing untoward there. I bend down to pick up the rough line of coins which have dropped through the arse-end of the furniture—a good few tens and twenties, even a nugget and a couple of fifties, and I'm stretching to reach another pound when the arms shoot out from the darkness and

grab my wrist, a matted hairy head is upon my forearm biting deep and hard, and I haul myself back upright with the thing snarling and coughing like a forty-a-day pit-bull.

I'm on my back then, the thing flung high and hard overhead, and when I get up it's Danda who has it cornered at the Fire-Exit. I step hesitantly towards the door. Elbow drags the pot across, one hand firmly about the handle, the other keeping the lid down as Sharif and his more vocal co-prisoners continue to bang and holler. I can hear my own panicked breath as I focus on the dim figure who now beckons us nearer with clawed fingers—this creature is much bigger than all the others, and when I make out who it is I know I shouldn't be surprised. It's a substantial Rod Stewart, perhaps sizes with Danda, but mean and drunk and still traces of acne about him. It's a young one, fit and ready to scrap.

Elbow looks at me, unknowing, but trusting still. I don't fancy tackling the thing. But Danda has the stick to his lips, and then, as soft and high as human ear can hear, the strains of Sailing flow about the lounge. It was ever a favourite of Mary as well as her Mum. Danda even crouches as he plays, intent on the tune as the shaking Rod calms, then lends his world-weary voice to the tune. Danda nods in approval. Even Sharif's protests are quieted as the second verse ends, and by the time the final lament is mid-way, even I can see that Stewart is spent, chest heaving, tears streaming, and he is hoisted into the pot with no great protest to join the swaying chorus of little people. It is as happy an ending as could be hoped for. When we open again for Boxing Day, all are happy to partake of the Festive Broth. It's a simple lentil concoction, but with a French bread roll on the side and a wee red napkin, it's a nice present to all the regulars and newcomers alike. It's all done by tea-time, and I make a point of washing the pot myself.

It wasn't pleasant filling the thing with the water, and even less pleasant having to hold the bastard lid down as they made their final protests. But as Elbow's Aunt told him, it's the only way to be sure. Only Danda was happy to climb in with the others.

If any man does not like his life, let him try the life of another and see how he likes it! Now I can taste real palm wine again!

We put another smaller pot of water on top to seal it, then waited, and it was another half bottle was done by the time the steam pulsed the end and we could go to the lounge to watch the box and try to start to forget it all. Some folk leave their dreams behind them, despite them, traces that won't be killed when events swamp. Mary must have done that, in her young way, as her mother did in hers. And mine were there too, as well as those of the many folk who lived and died here before us.

I suppose I cheated. Before Danda had finished the vodka he claimed to remind him of his beloved palm wine, and before Elbow had got back from the bog, I got on the oven glove, slid the lid over, and drew out the young Tina. She kicked, I let her go. She scampered across the worktop and behind the microwave before I even had the lid back in place. Sometimes now, when the place is quiet, when rain isn't lashing and wind isn't battering and shitehawks aren't screaming their get-up calls, on nights when I'm wondering about Mary and her Mum and all the what-ifs and the maybes and the what-to-nows, sometimes I catch a snatch of Nutbush from somewhere next door, in that front room, and I allow my uncovered Rottenrows to tap along.