

Granny Agus an Fear Gorm

By Dennis Corcoran – a true story from the early 1960s

Every morning – or nearly so - me granny, after seeing us off on our daily chores, would make herself another cup of tea and sit on the front window sill ... with the window open, weather permitting ... and greet passers-by ... sometimes in Irish, sometimes in English, depending on her mood, and if she knew them well enough to know their preferred tongue.

Thing is ... in the Brandywell, in Derry, in those days, no one had a car, so nearly everyone walked where ever they went ... and nearly everyone knew each other ... by face, by name, by temperament. You knew if they were an Irish speaker ... or if they cared to speak at all. You know how some people are ... too lost in their own woes to extend a courtesy to others.

Granny didn't care about that - she was a force to be reckoned with. She'd extend a greeting to the most cantankerous of beings. And if you were one of those not prone to reply, she'd be sure to speak louder, so you'd know that she knew your ways and was not about to let you pass by unaccosted. But most people were friendly enough. Granny was mostly seen as a pleasnry you encountered coming and going in the course of your daily cares ... with this one exception ...

... the RUC. For those of you who don't know, Derry was ruled by the English back then. It still is, in fact, although some things have changed – for the better. Oh, and RUC? – that stands for Royal Ulster Constabulary, what you might call police - she hated them. To a one. We all did ... although, to be honest, some were decent enough people ... but they all towed the line ... they all were an ever-present reminder that we didn't count ... one vote per house, no matter how many of us lived there. No wonder we had so little say in the running of things. If you were poor – and damned few of us weren't – you were, what's that American expression? S-O-L? – yea. And believe it or not, it was ok then - legal even - to post job adverts with the words, 'No Catholics Need Apply'. So, sure, to get by on a low wage, if you had any wage at all, you had to bunch up. There were nine of us in our 2-bedroom house ... four old enough to vote but only one would ever be counted – by law!

Anyway – back to granny Doherty, me mum's maiden name, Doherty.

She'd never utter a word to an RUC man walking the beat. Oh, and some made a point to greet her ... 'Morning, Mrs. Doherty' ... 'Fine day, Ms. Doherty' ... and she'd just sit there, mute, sometimes glaring at them, sometimes just looking the other way. Sometimes I'd hear her mutter something, under her breath ... something I'd not want to be repeating here. And sometimes, I'd hear the RUC man give out a laugh – like it was a game, greeting granny just to get a rise out of her. There can be a mighty thin line between love and hate.

Ar aon nós ... one morning – I don't remember why I wasn't at school ... I think I was six at the time – I'm sitting in the kitchen, granny at her window, tea in hand, and I hear her call out, 'Good morning, young man – and how are ye this fine morning,' which wasn't her usual. There was more pep or surprise or warmth or ... I don't know what - it was just different from her ordinary greeting.

So I get up, look into the front room and there, at granny's window, is this black man ... well, that's another yank thing, I think. You see, 'black man', in our tongue, is fear dubh, which is what we call the devil. We'd never call a person 'fear dubh' ... Folks you call 'black', we call 'blue' or 'fear gorm' in Irish ... So anyway there's this 'blue man', standing at our window, and granny and him are chatting it up. 'What brings you to the Brandywell? Oh, I see. From Meiriceá are ye - and what brings you to Ireland, then? Oh? Do you have family with you? Aw, now that's sad - you must be lonely. Come on inside - I've got tea - no coffee, but some good strong tea and biscuits ... Ah, 'biscuits' - that's our term for 'cookies' ...

So there she is, inviting this young fellow in for tea and sweets, and him saying, 'Yes, thank you - I'm so grateful to you for this' - and the next thing, the 3 of us are sitting at the kitchen table, me in awe of having an honest-to-god yank in our house ... here, in Derry, in the Brandywell - I mean, the only yanks I'd seen up to then were cowboys on our neighbor's tellie ... but, here, in real life, an in-the-flesh yank ... and them, chatting away. Ó Dhia! I gotta tell you, it was the most magical day of my life ... up to that point anyway.

So, there we are ... well, so there **they** are, chatting on about his job and why his Navy posted him to Derry ... where he'd gone to school, how much he missed home and family, and so on ... when, all of a sudden, he starts crying. Not like broken down sobbing or such, but crying - tears running down his cheeks, real tears ... !

Scared the shite out of me, to be honest. I thought - well, I didn't know what to think. But granny, too, she was kind of shocked, taken aback, so she says, real worried like, 'Did I say something wrong? Did I offend you in some way?' And he says, 'Oh, no, ma'am, no. On the contrary' and he starts telling us things I'd never heard the likes of, well outside of Derry that is.

'You see,' he says, 'this could never happen at home. There are streets I can't even walk down without being in constant fear of the police, or people yelling hateful things at me. When I go in a store, someone's always watching me, like I'm some kind of thief. I can't go to most restaurants, or see a movie, or ... I mean, the thought that anywhere in my own country, someone, especially a white woman, would stop to say hello ... invite me in ... talk with me like we were both just ordinary people, treat me like family even ... us just chancing to meet ... I ... I've never had such kindness ... I ... I ...'. And the tears running this whole time ...

Now, I was just a kid then ... I knew nothing more of the world then the one I lived in, so I blurt out, 'Are ye a Catholic then?' They looked at me, the two of them, him and granny ... silent as stones, then, all of a sudden, they burst out laughing ... like I was some kind of comedian or such. Well, eventually, he wiped the tears from eyes and, in good time, took his leave. They stood and hugged, him and granny, and he was gone. *[PAUSE]*

God, all this color shite: granny, a 'white woman'?. Bean bhán? Bean geal? If anything, she was sort of gray looking, to me anyway. Bean liath? Never heard of anyone called that. Of course, we called the RUC 'orange men' in English, 'Fir buí' in Irish ... which actually means 'yellow men' O Dhia, **what a mess!** Blue, Orange, Gray, Black, White, Yellow - I mean ... go ndéana Dia trócaire orainn go léir ... *[pause]* ... oh, sorry, that just means May God have mercy on us all!